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Symphony finale a thrilling experience

By Patricia Wetzel

Friday evening's performance by the El Paso Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Sarah Ioannides, highlighted a stunning performance by a master guitarist as well as the world premiere of an exciting orchestral work by a young composer who is destined to gain master status of his own.

The finale concert, which was a spectacular conclusion to a brilliant season, began with Verdi's "Overture to La Forza del Destino."

This orchestral classic features two themes: The first "fate" motif was ushered in by the strings, and the second more lyrical melody is derived from the prayer music of the second act of the opera. Several of the wind principals offered beautiful solos, and the return of the prayer theme with the full orchestra at the close of the piece was beautifully rendered under the baton of Maestra Ioannides.

Born the second son of "The Royal Family of Guitar," Pepe Romero is one of the world's most lyric, spontaneous and virtuosic guitarists.

His unamplified expansive sound filled the Plaza Theatre as he performed a flawless rendition of Joaquin Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez." Rodrigo was blinded at age 3 by diphtheria, which he said prompted him to a life in music.

He described this concerto as capturing "the fragrance of magnolias, the singing of birds and the gushing of fountains" — beauties perhaps best appreciated by a blind man. The piece features several traditional Spanish dances and folk forms, which were presented in a dazzling performance by Romero.

In the first movement, Romero demonstrated techniques from flamenco, *punteado* (picked ornamentation in flying scale passages) and *rasgueados* (strumming). The *adagio* movement was simply breathtaking as Romero played the beautiful melody with an organic fluidity. A lamenting theme was passed between Romero and the lyric English horn playing of Chris Wade. With the *crescendo*, Romero led the orchestra to a passionate pinnacle followed by a quiet ending to the movement.

The final movement contains both Baroque-sounding counterpoint and folk melodies that move from solo instruments to ensembles and finally a grand orchestral presentation that ultimately gives way to a delicate ending. The audience, rapt throughout the piece, was immediately on its feet.

Their praise was rewarded with an encore, "Gran Jota" by Spanish composer Francisco Tárrega, that was nothing short of pure magic. Not only did Romero continue to display an unparalleled virtuosity that is at once pristine and fluid, but he created sounds that one would have thought impossible from his instrument — from harp-like tones to the sound of a snare drum. Almost before the final chord was strummed, the audience was once again on its feet and all knew that we were in the

Portuguese composer who was commissioned by Ioannides to compose an original work — a world premiere — for the final concert of the 2006-2007 season.

His charge was to write a brief piece "full of breadth, color and direction," which he admitted had proved more challenging than having the liberty of length. How-

ever, in the brief span of nine minutes, Tinoco creates a piece that begins in the depths of the orchestra and maintains a driving, rhythmic energy as it climbs to a climactic yet whimsical conclusion.

"Ascent" contains a few simple motifs that build upon one another in a repetitive yet directional fashion and Ioannides is brilliant in creating a kinetic narrative. Tinoco's score contains a challenging percussion part that was deftly executed by the percussion section, and the orchestra's performance was dynamic and engaging. Although Tinoco's work may be new to many, his name is destined to become familiar to audiences around the world, and this audience was fortunate to be the first to relish this genius composition.

Respighi's "The Pines of Rome" concluded the evening, and once again, Ioannides was dazzling as she led the orchestra in an exhilarating performance of this tone poem. The first movement, "The Pines of the Villa Borghese," opened festively with the brass and winds evoking images of children at play.

Quite suddenly, the mood changes with "Pines near a Catacomb." The low strings began this movement with somber chords and were joined by the trombones in a theme reminiscent of a Gregorian chant. An invisible Sam Trimble introduced another theme of the movement with an offstage trumpet solo.

The third movement opens with a piano *credenza* followed by a beautiful clarinet solo performed by David Ross. Ioannides maintained a calm, reflective atmosphere to the closing ethereal singing of a nightingale, then once again swiftly changed the mood to the ominous sound of the opening of the final movement, "Pines of the Appian Way."

The brass were majestic in well-synchronized onstage and offstage military fanfares, and the full orchestra evoked a feel of triumphant motion that ended the piece and the symphony's season in a glorious climax.