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Neglected bassoon puts on show of beauty, ebullience  
Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

Mozart's is the only bassoon concerto that shows up in concert with any regularity, and even that one doesn't get done particularly often. It certainly doesn't get many performances as brilliant and beautiful as Sunday's rendition by the Midsummer Mozart Festival in Berkeley's First Congregational Church.

The soloist was Rufus Olivier, the longtime principal bassoonist for the San Francisco Opera and San Francisco Ballet, and one of the Bay Area's great undersung musical heroes. For his all-too-rare moment in the spotlight, he took hold of Mozart's youthful score and transformed it into an opportunity for full-strength display.

Not that Mozart didn't help things along, of course. His Bassoon Concerto, written at 18 for one of the players in the Salzburg court orchestra, is an ebullient little masterpiece whose elegance and wit go far beyond what the occasion must have demanded.

But it was left to Olivier and Music Director George Cleve to bring the piece's charms to full fruition. In the outer movements, Olivier tossed off the solo passagework with an air of amiable directness, as though the intent were to beguile as well as to dazzle, and he delivered the cadenzas with flawless timing.

Best of all was the slow movement, a lyrical solo based on a characteristic Mozartean melodic gesture that recurs in various spots, most notably the aria "Porgi amor" from "The Marriage of Figaro." Olivier invested the music with songful, soulful allure.

The rest of the evening - the final go-round for the first of the festival's two programs - was nearly as enchanting. Pianist Janina Fialkowska shared soloist's duties with a brisk, incisive account of the Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-Flat, K. 482.

Her playing was crisp and full of life, and she brought a ruminative depth to the slow movement that made the music seem to glow. The only fly in the ointment was Fialkowska's tendency to rush or lag - particularly in the first movement, where she had the most trouble picking a single tempo and sticking with it.

Framing the program were two orchestral pieces, done with Cleve's trademark brand of vibrant sound and rhythmic alertness.

The Divertimento in D, K. 251, opened the proceedings in a sleek performance that emphasized both the vivacity and emotional range of the music; oboist Laura Griffiths tackled the solo part with aplomb. A robust, broad-beamed account of the Symphony No. 34 in C brought things to a vivid close.