

**SYMPHONY REVIEW**  
**Without A Cat, Do the Mice**  
**Play Sloppily?**

**March 25, 2001**

**By Thomas Goss**

Whoever inherits the podium of the Marin Symphony will have his or her work cut out, as Sunday night's concert showed. Small habits of carelessness, little inconsistencies in pitch and rhythm, and looseness of ensemble all have grown over the past year into a consistent pattern of amateurishness as the orchestra tests out new conductors. This is a shame, because so many players of individual excellence are currently among the ranks, particularly in the string section, where much of the defect lies. There is little excuse, for many of these musicians also can play with tightness and accuracy, making a real presence in the other orchestras in which they perform. And there is no explanation, save the need of a firm hand at the tiller.

A firm hand was definitely not holding the baton this time around. Joseph Silverstein, a violinist and conductor with old-school grace and charm to burn, directed capably but showed little of the preparation necessary for the task. The program itself was a steady old mare, with few surprises and nothing much to distract it from its oats, though the curtain raiser of Irving Fine's *Serious Song* for string orchestra was a pleasant change of pace.

Silverstein's direction in this unusual and haunting post-Romantic piece of Americana was easy to read, perhaps a bit deliberate in gesture. Unfortunately, the string texture was hugely overbalanced by the presence of no less than seven basses in an orchestra with eight cellos and about a dozen of everything else. The result was that the conductor's emphatic direction brought forth a rather elephantine response in passages with much footwork, and seemed to overwork the more delicate places in the score for the upper strings.

**Violin Playing Inspired, But Not Quite In Tune**

Silverstein's playing in Mozart's Concerto No. 5 was intuitive in phrasing, delightful in color, inspired in emotion, and brilliant in technical polish — but unforgivable in its pitch center. I expect a certain degree of microtonal meander, even in Mozart occasionally, yet the pitch strayed so often in the first movement that it became at first hard to overlook, then difficult to excuse. He redeemed himself somewhat in the heartfelt Adagio, and was truly a joy to watch in the closing Menuetto. But other problems cropped up, in the looseness of the ensemble behind his flashing bow, as the strings lost touch with each other occasionally and the winds seemed to follow an antithetical Baroque dynamic phrasing.

The orchestra seemed to pull itself together in the final rendering of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Though balance problems still betrayed a lack of rehearsal discipline, the playing was enthusiastic and well delivered. Silverstein has a programmatic flair. It was fun to hear familiar

friends pop so clearly out of the score like the dog in the river, though certain characteristic movements, such as "Nimrod" seemed a bit staid and prissy. Still, the Finale: "E.D.U." had real teeth and took off like a rocket, showcasing the unusually excellent brass players of this ensemble. The cries of adulation at their individual section bow were loud and well merited.