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**Worcester Chamber Music Society is balanced, intelligent, passionate**

MUSIC REVIEW

**By Frank Magiera Telegram & Gazette Reviewer**

As if you needed another reason to love the Worcester Chamber Music Society, how about the delicious performance of four Schubert songs that opened Saturday evening's concert at All Saints Church? Or the exhilarating exploration of an experimental concertina by an eccentric 20th-century composer. If that wasn't enough, consider the seamless way these talented young musicians capitalized on the jazz potential of a popular Villa-Lobos melody.

Nearing the end of its second season, this group has proven once again that it deserves the accolades and the devoted following it has already attracted. Balanced, intelligent and passionate, the performances can be challenging as well as soothing. The only disappointment of Saturday's concert was that the tango music advertised in advance somehow never materialized. The published program was a little confusing, and many of the verbal explanations were lost in the vaulted expanse of the church. But hey, for my money, all is well with the world any time Maria Ferrante shows up to sing.

Indeed, if the society is still a fledgling group, its members are not only full-fledged but also top-flight musicians as well. While Ms. Ferrante may have been the best-known performer at Saturday's concert, it's not quite fair to say she was the headliner, which actually may have been a musical instrument as much as it was the handful of accomplished musicians who combined into duets, trios, quintets and septets, all to the delight of the audience.

The instrument was a full-throated double bass played by Max Zeugner, which took center stage in the opening sequence of Schubert songs, accompanied by pianist Jonathan Yasuda. Apparently the Schubert pieces replaced the Astor Piazzolla tangos that were originally scheduled. That was just fine because Zeugner and Yasuda easily found the mellow soul of these four straightforward pieces.

Then there was Ms. Ferrante. For all their instrumental talents, few chamber groups can boast the vitality of a world-class soprano to breathe life into classical vocals the way she does. Her opening piece was Respighi's "Il Tramonto" ("The Sunset"), the composer's musical setting of a Shelley poem, which was at once brooding and uplifting. Violists Peter Sulski and Mark Berger, violinists Krista Reisner and Rohan Gregory and cellists Michal Palzewicz and Jan Muller-Szerwas provided a rich and subtle accompaniment.

Flutist Tracy Kraus joined Berger and Zeugner for Erwin Schulhoff's concertina for flute, viola and double bass, a dashing performance of unusual rhythms and effects. Berger explained that Schulhoff was an often isolated composer whose musical experiments sliced through conventional boundaries long before the heralded work of John Cage. The piece in Saturday's concert, flavored so eloquently by Kraus' adroit playing, was infinitely more accessible than that comparison might suggest.

After the break all the musicians took to the stage to perform a searing reading of Richard Strauss' "Metamorphosen."

The sweetest surprise of all came with the closer, which started out as a fairly straightforward classic rendition of the celebrated Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5, with Ms. Ferrante's voice as the main ingredient and Zeugner and Yasuda supplying some basic accompaniment. As the trio delved further and further into the piece, the color changed and changed again, and before long violinist Rohan Gregory drifted in at the back of the church and slowly made his way up the aisle. As he progressed, the piece was transformed into a throbbing jazz rendition with Yasuda expertly filling in all the blanks. Clearly this is a group with style, imagination and chops.