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Chamber Music Society delivers perfect concert

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Worcester Chamber Music Society set aside a portion of its proceeds from Saturday night's concert at The First Unitarian Church for victims of Haiti's earthquake. That recognition of the power of accident in life got underscored when the A string of David Russell's cello snapped about two thirds of the way through violist Mark Berger's original composition "Spell for Flute and String Trio," bringing that complex, beguiling work to an instant halt.

With deft professionalism Berger and violinist Krista Bruckland Reisner, recounted instances of their own snapped strings, while Russell went off stage to find a replacement string. When that took longer than anticipated, director Peter Sulski (violin/viola) announced that the third portion of the program featuring Maria Ferrante singing Mozart opera arias would proceed apace, maintaining the flow of first rate music-making.

Ferrante and pianist Ian Watson came out and quickly dispelled any memory of accident. With velvet soaring tones, Ferrante delivered the sweet lover's plaint "L'Amoro" from "Il re Pastore," and then perfectly threaded through the biting irony of "Come scoglio," from "Cosi fan Tutti," as if to remind the audience of the aria's ending sentiment: "Respect this example of constancy." Watson's accompaniment was sweet, soft, and subtle. Ferrante's fans in Worcester are legion and they quickly rewarded her supple, resilient singing with a standing ovation.

After the intermission, Berger and company returned for a second run at his composition. And a second hearing turned out to be an enormous bonus - the

overarching structure of the piece clarified and one could latch onto the rhythmic reverses, fierce pizzicato snapping, and the delicious mix of dissonance and harmony that flood through the work. Berger is a gifted composer and hearing his work at these concerts is a wonderful payoff. As always, Tracy Kraus's flute work was nuanced, spot-on, easily authoritative and Reisner's tones in the upper register were pure and ethereal.

The concert opened and closed with two stalwart romantic pieces, Mahler's lonely, truncated chamber work "Piano Quartet in A minor," and Brahms' epic and thunderous "Piano Quintet in F minor." It's remarkable how symphonic Mahler can make a quartet sound, although for this reviewer the melancholy was ladled out with a bit too much schmaltz. The Brahms was altogether more convincing. At the start Watson took off his jacket, signaling a lively, no-holding-back, muscular assault on the work and his interplay with the quartet was spirited and moving.

The tone from Russell's restored cello wove magically through the andante and scherzo. And the rousing finale sprayed endless energy and commitment over a not entirely convincing integration. The effect instantly pulled the audience into a standing, cheering ovation.

Worcester Chamber Music Society always provides stunning, adventurous music-making. There's nothing accidental about its competence and professionalism. Don't miss the society's concerts in February, May and June.

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