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## All-Russian program thrills

### MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette REVIEWER

**WORCESTER—** It's not just the playing, Mitya, it's the programming. The playing by Worcester Chamber Music Society in its final concert of the season Friday night at the First Baptist Church was, per expectation, superb — passionate, energetic, thrillingly lyrical.

But it was the all-Russian programming that provided the extra, magical kick: a rarely heard piano trio by Shostakovich, followed by three songs by Rachmaninoff and then his thunderous Suite No. 2, opus 17, for two pianos. For the overflow crowd that filled the church's upper auditorium, the emotional trajectory of these works was straight up, reaching a crescendo for the piano pyrotechnics of Ian Watson and William Ness. But compositionally, the program began at the summit with Shostakovich's trio, written when he was 17 in St. Petersburg.

As the Cold War retreats, musicologists have moved away from the view of Shostakovich as an artist thwarted by Stalinist terror and hiding behind irony and double-entendre, to recognition of his universal genius, easily on par with Mozart and Beethoven. Given that recognition, energy has been poured into discovering everything he wrote, whenever he wrote it.

The Piano Trio No. 1, opus 8, has been recovered from his earliest student notes and, surprise, his sweet, soulful melody, his wit, and explosive abruptness are evident well before his Stalinist travail.

Violinist Peter Sulski explained before the piece was performed that the audience might find "the softer" Shostakovich in this work, and so it was. The gorgeously lyrical Shostakovich was lovingly delivered by Sulski, who always, whether as violist or violinist, plays from deeply inside the music, together with cellist Jan Muller-Szeraws, who drew an uncanny, ethereal beauty out of his instrument, and pianist Jonathan Yasuda, who provided biting authoritative linkage amid the traded-about melodies. It was an amazing and mesmerizing performance.

If the trio weren't treat enough, the program moved on to Maria Ferrante's rendering of Rachmaninoff's songs. Ferrante was in crowd-pleasing voice, reaching a supple, hushed, upper-register radiance that seemed to embody the final lyrics of the first song: "It is fine here. ... Only God and me, Flowers and old pine, and you my dream!" It provided a splendid apex send-off to the intermission.

The final work of the program brought two lidless pianos together near the center of the audience semicircle, with Watson and Ness seated backs to most of the crowd. The opening march of the Rachmaninoff piece set the tone, at once supercharged, thunderous, spraying clouds of notes skyward in a magical meshing of the two instruments. The rafters seemed to resonate as the throbbing billows of sound punched against the walls of the hall. There were moments of respite in the second movement, "Valse," and third movement, "Romance," but mostly it was Watson and Ness daring the audience to lift off with their dazzling, safety-belt-required playing, pushing decibels to the limit. An ecstatic audience stood stomping and demanding an encore at the finish, and Ness and Watson obliged with a lyrical, calming "Berceuse" (lullaby) from Gabriel Faure's suite, "Dolly."

What a gift Maestros Sulski and Watson have given Worcester in creating the Worcester Chamber Music Society and its expanded companion ensemble, Worcester Collegium.