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Chamber gold overflows

WCMS debut enralls audience

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette reviewer

There was anticipatory electricity in the air concerning the debut of the Worcester Chamber Music Society Saturday night at St. Paul's Cathedral — a sense that something very special was about to happen in the Worcester musical scene. Nine local A-list musicians with world-class credentials more than fulfilled that anticipation in a uniquely crafted concert that included Bach, a Mozart flute quartet and three little-known songs brilliantly executed by soprano Maria Ferrante.

WCMS directors Peter Sulski (violin, viola) and Tracy Kraus (flute) expressed delight and appreciation at the size of the overflow crowd. Then they introduced the first two performers, Michal Palzewicz (cello) and Ian Watson (harpichord), who deftly settled into Bach's "Sonata in G Minor." In the adagio second movement, Palzewicz supplely drew out a gorgeous singing tone from his instrument: pure, mesmerizing Bach with impeccable accompaniment from Watson. And equally pure, energetic élan in the final allegro. An auspicious opening.

Watson cued up the second offering by noting that WCMS was "determined to wring the last bit of mileage out of Mozart's 250th birthday anniversary" with a performance of his "Flute Quartet in A." Kraus, Sulski and Palzewicz were joined by Mark Berger (viola). The result was a radiant, lilting, entirely magical rendering of this very sunny music written for Mozart's favorite Viennese family, the Jacquins.

Kraus' flute playing was bell clear, in perfect balance with the strings, as theme and variations passed around from instrument to instrument. That flawless sense of balance also permeated her accompaniment of Ferrante in the next selection of songs — a far trickier enterprise, matching tone to Ferrante's vocal pyrotechnics.

Joining Kraus and Ferrante was the young pianist Jonathan Yasuda. The audience, already enthused by the Bach and Mozart performances, explosively celebrated Ferrante's dynamic coloratura renderings of Eva Dell'Acqua's "Villanelle" and Sir Henry Bishop's "Lo! Here the Gentle Lark."

After the intermission, Ferrante returned for one more musical offering, Julius Benedict's "La Capinera (the Wren)." Then the players turned to the second Bach piece, the "5th Brandenburg Concerto." Joining the entourage were Carolyn Davis Fryer (double bass) and Jorge Soto (violin). Kraus and Watson handled their solos with aplomb, precision and perfect balance among the instruments.

The audience felt and responded to the energy and commitment that Sulski, Kraus and Watson have brought to the creation of this chamber group through the passion they poured into Bach's piece. There was an instant, vibrant standing ovation.

With the birth last spring of the Worcester Collegium, a chamber orchestra, and now the WCMS, some kind of critical mass has been achieved in Central Massachusetts (think also of Symphony Pro Musica) to launch what are really exciting programs. With its sparkling debut WCMS illustrates the magic of chamber music: that double payoff of musicians responding to each other, and audiences responding to the small ensemble.

The full symphony orchestra, especially in America, may follow the SUV. It's clearly irreplaceable for certain kinds of heavy hauling, but how much Mahler, Bruckner, Berlioz, Wagner and Verdi can one body stand? For the intimate, unalloyed, pure spiritual joy that Daniel Levitin describes in "This is Your Brain on Music," nothing can match chamber music.

Next Sunday, listeners have a double choice: the Worcester Collegium in an all-Mozart program at St. Paul's at 4 p.m. or Symphony Pro Musica in Westboro at 3:30 p.m.