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## **Review: Worcester chamber group is a crowd-pleaser**

**By John Zeugner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER**

Worcester Chamber Music Society, courtesy of Assumption College's HUMANARTs, presented a program, labeled "The Bohemians" last night in the college's Chapel of the Holy Spirit — surely the most intoxicating of all of Worcester's chamber music venues, despite the ascetic hardness of the pews.

The program featured three rarely performed works and one golden warhorse staple, Dvorak's Piano Quintet in A major, Opus 81. Reversing the order of the printed program, the chamber group began with an aria from Dvorak's opera "Rusalka," featuring soprano Maria Ferrante. It may be the reversal allowed WCMS to get the full complement of musicians immediately before the capacity crowd.

Tracy Kraus (flute), Krista Buckland Reisner and Rohan Gregory (violins), Peter Sulski and Mark Berger (violas), David Russell and Jan Muller-Szeraws (cellos), and Ian Watson (piano) sweetly played the opening to Ferrante's glittering entry. As always, Ferrante delivered an ethereal purity of tone that even its most hushed moments projected brilliantly, especially in the chapel's wooden vaults. She spun out the aria, "Song to the Moon," in an arrangement by WCMS gifted violist and composer Berger, that generated a wonderfully delicate interplay among instruments and Ferrante's voice. It was a convincing opening that set a high bar indeed. It also meant that Dvorak's lilting melodies would bookend the concert. The middle compositions displayed a different Czech-Slavic heritage, including surprising American influences.

Erwin Schulhoff, born in Prague and killed in a Nazi concentration camp, composed in the early 1920s a complex string sextet that incorporated elements from Debussy, Dadaism, Czech folk songs and American jazz. Schulhoff's work is not well-known. There are a few fugitive CDs of his chamber works extant, one with the enticing subtitle: "Czech Degenerate Music." WCMS attacked the sextet with the passion and commitment of dedicated proselytizers; dizzying pizzicatos, soaring violin melodies, haunting cello slow-downs and bow beat-downs, easily converted the audience. Parts of the second movement, "Tranquillo" seemed to foreshadow Hitchcock film backgrounds, and in a pre-concert talk Gregory noted that Schulhoff had experimented with "silence" as composition well before John Cage took up that challenge.

After the intermission came Bohuslav Martinu's "Madrigal Sonata for Flute, Violin, and Piano," written in New York in 1942 after Martinu had fled Nazi-occupied Europe. There was a mesmerizing melodic trade-around among Gregory, Watson, and Kraus, opening with a prancing line that faded to a flute solo line, then quickly back to a searing, throbbing finish to the first movement. The second movement employed ingenious pizzicato violin work against flute and piano melodies that clearly captivated the audience.

The program closed with the always crowd-pleasing, gorgeous Dvorak Piano Quintet. The piece bubbles with folk song melodic richness — swelling and soaring with a kind of sun-splashed geniality and earthy celebration -- uplifting and transporting music. With thorough professionalism, Reisner, Gregory, Russell, Sulski and Watson set about their tasks. And at the end the audience stood cheering. To raise quibbles about that enthusiasm is rather like flinging a tomahawk against the Great Wall of China. Nonetheless, this reviewer found tempo a bit slow in the opening and ending of the Quintet, the occasional cello and violin vibrato a bit heavy, and closing the soundboard on Watson's sparkling piano seemed to muzzle the pyrotechnics Dvorak afforded that instrument. Trifling objections to the inevitable proposition that WCMS is an extraordinary gift to Central Massachusetts, an ensemble never to be missed, especially when playing in Assumption's Chapel of the Holy Spirit.

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