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Grand finale in Clinton for Worcester chamber music season

MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

The Worcester Chamber Music Society ended its third season in expansive and challenging style Saturday night at the First Unitarian Church and Sunday afternoon at the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton.

At the Sunday afternoon concert, musician-directors Peter Sulski and Tracy Kraus noted that the group's audience had outgrown the museum's upper hall and consequently WCMS would move to a larger venue in Clinton next season.

However, in several ways the museum was the perfect backdrop for this program, which featured songs and poems by three contemporary composers: William Bolcom, Manuel Valls (with soprano Maria Ferrante delivering the lyrics in pure and perfect articulation), and WCMS's violist and composer, Mark Berger.

In addition, there was a Chinese folksong and poem brilliantly sung by Chinese soprano, Xue Mei Jiang, and music by 20th century composers Wang Zhi Xin and Li Ying-hai. The performance of Schubert's beloved "Trout Quintet" spread a final canopy of joy over the whole enterprise.

The museum's icons along the right side wall of the hall, and especially the striking, oversize interpretations of 15th- and 16th-century icons by the Russian contemporary artist Alyona Knyzeva on the wall behind the musicians, underscored the program's blend of East and West modern music, emblematic of Russia's Asian and European roots.

Valls' "Canciones Sefarditas" provides *nine* spins on traditional medieval Sephardic songs and featured Ms. Ferrante, backed by flutist Ms. Kraus and guitarist Kathleen Corcoran. Both showed wonderful technical competence. The third song, "Adio, Querida," illustrated, as indeed did the whole concert, the suppleness and integration of these musicians. In their third year of performances, they intuit and balance each other's moves.

WCMS's violist and composer Mr. Berger, in his program notes, said his composition "Upon a Wheel of Cloud" stemmed from his reading of Emily Dickinson's poem, "Like Rain it sounded till it curved." And like that poem the piece had surprising turns, ironies, and occasional melting poignancies. Enamored of the low string sounds, Mr. Berger scored the piece for viola, cello (Jan Muller-Szeraws) and double bass (Rob Nairn), with deft rasps like breaths, occasional atonal riffs, a soaring conclusion and sudden fadeout. The piece was the most arresting and interesting of an arresting and interesting program. It seems Worcester County is turning out composers as rapidly as trees fell in the ice storm — think of Joseph Summer, Margery Ziegler Goldstein, and Mark Berger all weighing in within the past two months.

The concert's first half closed with the Chinese compositions sung with astonishing dynamic range and style by Ms. Jiang, wearing what appeared to be Chinese opera regalia. William Ness provided piano accompaniment, evocatively mimicking the sounds of Chinese flutes and somber temple bells.

The second half opened with Bolcom's "Let Evening Come," settings of poems by Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, and Jane Kenyon. Ms. Kenyon's second volume of poems provided the title piece, which is full of the anguish and resignation with which she faced her death from leukemia in 1995.

Ms. Ferrante was joined by Ian Watson at the piano and Mr. Sulski on viola. These three professionals clearly knew each other's moves and the subtlety and balance with which they threaded up the Bolcom piece was a marvel to experience. Ms. Ferrante's radiant voice seemed to strengthen through the piece, and reached an apex of beauty with the final "let evening come."

As if in answer to Bolcom/Kenyon's despair, the concert closed with a lush, stunningly balanced and polished performance of Schubert's quintet. It's no secret that "The Trout" ascends or squirms according to the artistry of the pianist in the group. And pianist Mr. Watson, with technique to burn, deftly reined in the pyrotechnics to perfectly mesh the cascade of mind-boggling melodies with violinist Krista Buckland Reisner, violist Mr. Sulski, cellist Mr. Muller-Szeraws, and bassist Mr. Nairn. The result was captivating music of the highest order, generating a standing ovation.

WCMS for next season plans Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, Mahler and Brahms piano quartets and a Brandenburg Extravaganza. One can hardly wait.

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