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Worcester Chamber musicians shine at museum

MUSIC REVIEW

By Joyce Tamer TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

“Kennedy to Kent State: Images of a Generation” is the title of a compelling photography exhibition currently on view at the Worcester Art Museum. Photographs of the Viet Nam War; the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.; the Civil Rights Movement; the Bay of Pigs; and the shootings at Kent State are all found within the collection, which is confined primarily to the decade of the '60s. In an attempt to present a concert that reflected some of the music of that era, the Worcester Chamber Music Society presented a concert in the Museum Sunday evening called “The White House and Beyond.”

That relationship was tenuous at best, but that in no way affected the brilliance of the performance. Five regular members of the Society — Joshua Gordon, cello; Rohan Gregory, violin; Tracy Kraus, flute; Krista Buckland Reisner, violin; and Peter Sulski, viola — were joined by guest pianist Lois Shapiro, for the program which opened with a Catalan folk song arranged by Pablo Casals, who did indeed play at the White House during the Kennedy administration. Gordon and Shapiro presented the piece, Song of the Birds, which it is said Casals sometimes used as an encore for his concerts. The duo continued with Beethoven's Cello Sonata #3, opus 67, which, like the Casals' arrangement, was written for the piano and cello as equal partners. Both of these musicians brought formidable musical skills to their playing, which resulted in a refined, sensitive and eminently satisfying musical performance.

A single movement work by the 21st century composer, Ben Johnston, who was influenced by the avant garde music of John Cage and Harry Partch, challenged both the musicians and the audience. His String Quartet #4 is constructed in the very traditional theme and variation form, but is composed using very nontraditional microtones. The audience was forewarned that this compositional technique would make the piece sound “different” and that we should “go with the flow.” The Quartet is based on the melody, Amazing Grace, which was clearly heard in the statement of the theme and the first few variations, although the harmonic structure was definitely unusual. Subsequent variations became increasingly complex, both tonally and rhythmically, with only snippets of the original theme emerging from time to time. Though foreign to ears accustomed to traditional diatonic music, the piece was endlessly interesting and enjoyable to hear.

The first half of the program ended with Threnody I and II by Aaron Copland. Threnody is a song of lamentation and indeed, Copland was commissioned by the publishers Boosey and Hawkes to compose a commemorative piece on the death of Igor Stravinsky, resulting in Threnody I. This is a short, quiet and elegiac piece, scored for violin, viola and cello, which play a repetitive underlying line, while Tracy Kraus, resident flutist, wove a melodic tapestry above. Copland later wrote Threnody II in memory of a friend. This piece immediately sounded like Copland with widely spaced open chords so reminiscent of his orchestral music. For the second elegy, written for the same four instruments, Kraus used the seldom seen or heard alto flute, which created quite a different tonal dynamic within the group. Threnody I and II are each quite short and together they made an interesting musical pairing.

After intermission, Reisner, Gordon and Shapiro gave a ravishing reading of a late work by Felix Mendelssohn, the Piano Trio in d minor, op. 49. The sunshine of Mendelssohn's early works was nowhere evident here, replaced by a darker, more restless air. The turbulent and agitated. first movement was followed by a more tranquil second movement. The third was a delightful elfin romp; and the fourth, which contains melodic material from the first movement, was passionate and thrilling. Their brilliant reading brought the audience to its feet.

Joshua Gordon, the newest member of the Worcester Chamber Music Society, performed in all six compositions on the program, and was soloist in two of them. He is a great asset to the Society, evident in this tour de force performance which displayed his amazing musical abilities. Lois Shapiro, a magnificent pianist, was a welcome guest, playing with amazing technical facility, tonal coloration, and rhythmic energy. One hopes she will return again and again.

It was a pleasure once again to attend a collaborative endeavor between the Museum and the Society, occasions which enrich our appreciation of both arts. Visit our gem of a museum often and don't miss any opportunity to hear the Worcester Chamber Music Society. They are both true Worcester treasures.

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