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Review: Worcester Chamber Music Society closes season in style

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WORCESTER — The Worcester Chamber Music Society closed out its sixth season last night with an after-concert bash celebrating the group's first CD.

The disk is a sweet sampler of live excerpts from Bach to Faure, culled from the group's short career. The final concert at the First Unitarian Church, like the CD, provides compelling evidence of the growth and integration among WCMS's players. Their easy anticipation of each others' moves in a wondrous musical professionalism.

The concert featured, as do all of WCMS's efforts, an envelope-pushing blend of things borrowed, blue and newly born - thematically linked this time with connections to apparent American experiences. The opener was a seldom heard Aaron Copland "Duo for Flute and Piano" written in that iconic composer's seventieth year.

Worcester Chamber flutist Tracey Kraus demonstrated once again her pure, flowing tone, stunning breath control - perfectly meshing with William Ness's deft, light, and scampering piano accompaniment. The piece was a warm introduction to the concert, periodically echoing through its three movements signal elements that Copland, years before, had spun into his "Appalachian Spring" and "Rodeo."

The second piece was the latest provocative composition from Worcester Chamber violist/composer Mark Berger. In his pre-concert remarks Berger noted that he composed the piece with the personalities and interests of each chamber musician in mind. So that in some sense the musical abstractions flowing from his considerable compositional talent embody a fusion of the work the chamber has done, an admittedly weird observation to make about a thoroughly independent, remarkable musical piece.

Who could have imagined the instrumental juxtapositions of flute (Kraus) bass clarinet (William Kirkley), cello (David Russell) and piano (the redoubtable Ian Watson)? Yet this improbable mix spins out lush cello melodies, explosive piano bombast as well as rippling flute lines, and beguiling and commanding moments of silence including an unconscionably held final empty hesitation -- transfixing the audience. It's a single movement piece with, for this reviewer at least, a fleeting occasional nano resonance of Gershwin's song "Summertime." Berger titled the piece "Bloom," as in plant not James Joyce (even though in previous compositions Berger has keyed off literary allusions, particularly T.S. Eliot's poetry). And the piece does "bloom" in a way Sibelius liked to reference at the end of his life: music that breaks free of traditional forms and flowers organically. One eagerly awaits further shoots from the Berger garden.

In the blue category, the chamber rendered Samuel Barber's string quartet that eventually yielded America the full string version of his second movement adagio. Now of course it's the mandatory music for any state or celebrity funeral, or any somber moment in any war film. "Platoon" wrung the adagio dry. At least hearing the cleaner string quartet version allowed chamber violinists Krista Buckland Reisner, and Rohan Gregory, violist Peter Sulski, and cellist Joseph Gordon to sort out the ever spiraling, ever soaring ever heart-rending individual threads of the adagio. And also provide the passionate preparatory buttressing of the frenzied first movement.

The final movement, truncated and unsatisfactory, never did, as Barber acknowledged, match the extraordinary power of the adagio, and thus paved the way, and probably made mandatory, the full string version.

After the intermission and in the borrowed category, the chamber tackled Dvorak's formidable string quintet in E flat Major,

Opus 97. In that magic July of 1893 Dvorak hatched his famous "American" String Quartet, in F Major, Opus 96, and liberally borrowed from it to pen the string quintet. Melodies flow into and around both pieces in ways so suggestive as to fuse the compositions.

Both allegedly borrow from American Indian rhythms and Negro spirituals, but most commentators now argue that it was Dvorak's move to Spillville, Iowa, that put him back in touch with Eastern European compatriots and it was their folk traditions that he explored, not American ones in these two efforts. Once Dvorak got free of New York City and the duties of the new National Conservatory (that would become the Juilliard School) he liberated again his amazing melodic gifts. Worcester Chamber's Buckland Reisner and Gregory (violins) Berger and Sulski (violas) and Russell (cello) brought ferocious passion to the quintet. The trade-arounds and hand-offs were executed faultlessly and with energy, brio, conviction.

These five knew each other's every move and the melodic thrust and commitment mounted steadily into an explosive standing ovation.

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