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Article published Apr 15, 2013

Balance, beauty from Worcester Chamber Music Society

MUSIC REVIEW

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WORCESTER — “With Breath and Bow,” the Worcester Chamber Music Society’s penultimate concert of the season, made its way to the First Unitarian Church on Saturday evening. Drawing on a large cross-section of the ensemble’s core membership, the WCMS delivered a well-conceived program of generally unfamiliar music by Brahms and Walter Piston, along with Mozart’s “String Quintet in C.”

Brahms’ “Two Songs” for soprano, viola, and piano — his only lieder for voice, piano, and an additional instrument — began tentatively but gradually found a sure footing. Soprano Maria Ferrante was joined by violist Mark Berger and pianist William Ness in both songs, “Stilled Longing” and “Sacred Lullaby.” All three musicians seemed to be sounding out balances in the beginning of the former, but Mr. Berger’s sweet account of the viola obbligato on its last stanza ushered in a sense of security and peace that carried through the “Lullaby.”

Despite the initial balance problems, both Ms. Ferrante and Mr. Ness were in fine form, as well, in both songs. Ms. Ferrante, a local favorite, delivered warm accounts of both texts and Mr. Ness managed Brahms’ sometimes knotty keyboard writing with both ease and grace.

Arguably the high point of the concert, though, was Walter Piston’s “Quintet for Flute and String Quartet.” A New England native, Piston often marries a craggy, early 20th-century American style (think early Copland) with refined sensibilities (like Copland, Piston studied with the great French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in the 1920s) in his music.

Cast in four movements, the 1942 Quintet features both characteristics in equal measure, and the piece possesses a strong sense of narrative drama as a result. The outer movements counter each other: the first, all graceful urbanity, balances the dyspeptic finale, which sounds something like the musical equivalent of a late-night bull session — full of competing ideas and arguments that are eventually resolved in delightfully brusque fashion. In between are a slow movement of austere beauty and a vivacious, witty scherzo for muted strings and flute.

Throughout, Piston’s writing for flute and strings is remarkably balanced. There’s little sense of solo flute pitted against the string ensemble; rather, this is a piece that explores the unique sonic possibilities of this ensemble.

In Saturday’s performance, Tracy Kraus tackled Piston’s flute writing with aplomb; and the quartet of Krista Buckland Reiser, Rohan Gregory, Peter Sulski and Joshua Gordon navigated the Quintet’s vigorously contrapuntal textures with clarity and purpose. One came away from the performance as impressed by the energetic playing as by the piece itself. This is great music that ought to be far better known than it is. Hats off to the Worcester Chamber Music Society for programming it.

After intermission came Mozart’s “String Quintet in C,” K. 515.

One of the big problems with Mozart interpretation, generally, is the sense that the music must be played cleanly and perfectly because textures are generally clear and there’s little room for players to hide. That’s all good and true, but, at its worst, what this approach leads to is a kind of emasculated music — very pretty, but not much else. A far better *modus operandi* would be to treat Mozart’s music the same as Haydn’s or Beethoven’s: punchy, volatile, filled with expressive and dramatic extremes. That’s the line of attack the strings took in Saturday night’s performance, and that’s one reason this performance stands out so strongly.

Written in 1787, Mozart’s “Quintet in C” is forward-looking in just about every way: It’s long, moody, and filled with all sorts of unexpected key changes and pauses. But it’s also charming, lyrical and affable. Saturday’s performance was all this, capturing the symphonic sweep of the opening movement and the brilliant wit of the finale with equal focus. The high point of

the performance, though, was the slow movement, a rapturous duet for violin and viola that brought forth some of the most numinous playing of the night from Ms. Buckland Reiser and Mr. Sulski.

At the end of Saturday's pre-concert lecture, the WCMS presented a brief recital by members of its new Neighborhood Strings program. That the society puts together and presents thought-provoking and well-played concerts is, after seven years now, almost to be expected, but the ways that the organization has meaningfully integrated itself into the greater Worcester community of late is, perhaps, even more commendable.

This is an indispensable ensemble for many reasons, all of which were on display Saturday night.

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