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A passionate musical statement against war

MUSIC REVIEW

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"I didn't grow up in a vacuum," was Aaron Copland's response to those surprised that he, a classically trained composer, was familiar with forms of popular music, particularly jazz. A similar sentiment — that music doesn't exist on its own; rather, the various arts have much to say to one another — has been guiding the Worcester Art Museum's chamber music series this season, resulting in some of the best-programmed classical concerts in town in the last year.

The final concert of the 2012-13 season, presented on Saturday, took as its departure point Nancy Spero's 2005 "Cri du Coeur" ("Cry of the Heart," on display at WAM until Oct. 13). Spero's last major work on paper, "Cri du Coeur" has been described as "a passionate cry against war, death, and destruction that is both political and personal, social and metaphysical."

That's a tall order to complement, but the Worcester Chamber Music Society came up with a program of three pieces that did just that, augmenting the timelessness of Spero's haunting montage with a selection of string quartets by Schubert and Mendelssohn, and Claude Debussy's *Syrinx*.

Mendelssohn's sublimely turbulent String Quartet in F minor opened the concert, its passages of glimmering hopefulness strewn across an otherwise violently welling soundscape providing a striking aural counterpoint to the recurring image of lamenting women in "Cri du Coeur."

There are many ways to play this piece, and on Saturday the WCMS opted for the lyrical and resigned approach. This works well to a point — the first two movements, especially, featured passages of ferocious intensity around moments of relative calm — but the first half of the finale might have benefited from a greater focus on the music's energetic qualities over its rhapsodic. Happily, the quartet of violinists Krista Buckland Reiser and Rohan Gregory, violist Peter Sulski, and cellist David Russell tapped into a current over the movement's closing bars and made electrifying work of them.

Schubert's massive String Quartet in D minor, subtitled "Death and the Maiden," closed the evening.

Saturday's performance was grounded by Mr. Russell's stentorian cello playing. From the weighty, spastic interjections of the first movement, to the lush utterances of the variations and the delirious rounds of the final tarantella, his instrument was the anchor to which the other members of the ensemble remained tethered harmonically, motivically, and expressively, regardless of where the music took them.

And it took them many places. Though the symphonic opening movement felt a bit loose, structurally, the variations grieved, raged, exulted, and accepted with a real sense of inevitability. The scherzo was powerfully bipolar, its gentle trio section proving a glassy respite from outer passages of fearsome punchiness. And the finale, with its manic changes of mood and content, showcased the playing of tight rhythmic precision and tragic grandeur.

In between the quartets, flutist Tracy Kraus delivered a transfixing account of the Debussy. Placed amid two pillars of musical Romanticism, Debussy's abstract language makes an especially powerful impression: in just over three minutes, *Syrinx* says as much as some pieces do in an hour.

Ms. Kraus's sensitive performance was delicate and refined, yet deeply expressive. In it, she accomplished, musically, one of the goals of "Cri du Coeur:" giving voice to the grief of the individual within the collective mass of humanity. Not only can the arts say much to each other, she seemed to be suggesting, so can people: we're all in this together, after all.

In this context, *Syrinx* proved perhaps the most apt musical selection of this peculiarly satisfying season at WAM.

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