

Review

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet at Plymouth Church (April 30)

by Daniel Hathaway



After a season well-provisioned with string quartets — the bread and butter of chamber music presenters — it was refreshing to have the Cleveland Chamber Music Society re-invite the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet to end its subscription season at Plymouth Church on April 30. This concert marked their third appearance on the series.

String quartets are homogenous — three different-sized members of the same family. A woodwind quintet celebrates un-likeness: five different-hued instruments — a flute, an oboe, a clarinet, a bassoon and a horn (isn't that a brass instrument?) — all of which are expected to blend together into an expressive ensemble and keep the ear engaged during a full-length concert. Only the best ensembles can achieve that end, and the Berliners are very good at it, harmoniously melding their sound while still preserving the individual personalities of their instruments, some of which in the case of this quintet feature distinct regional timbres.

Beginning and ending with salubrious 18th and early 19th century works by Mozart and Czech composer Joseph Bohuslav Foerster, the Berlin Quintet populated the middle section of their program with quirky and eccentric but very different quintets by Jean Françaix and Pavel Haas.

Mozart's *Fantasy in f*, K. 594 and *Andante in F*, K. 616 were commissioned to be played by curiosities — mechanical organs housed in a Vienna mausoleum — but there's nothing frivolous about their musical content. Both works (and their sister, the large *Fantasy in f*, K. 608) are late Mozart at his best, and thanks to their quality have frequently been arranged for solo organ or four-hand piano. But because Mozart wrote the original scores without human practicalities in mind, even the best reworkings can get fingers tangled up.

The expert arrangements for wind quintet by flutist Michael Hasel (himself trained as an organist) neatly took care of the technical issues while infusing the pieces with new color and charm. They're still difficult to play, but the Berliners made seemingly easy work out of their florid passagework and tossed motifs back and forth with amazing precision.

At the other end of the program, Foerster's immediately likeable *Quintet in D, op. 95* was solidly constructed and abundantly lyrical, replete with attractive melodies and sonorities. The composer was drawn to the different personalities of the five instruments he wrote for and made the most of those characteristics (“the low and high registers of the flute, the exultant sound of the oboe, the lizard-like suppleness and the dramatic accents of the clarinet, the dreamy cantilena of the horn, the humorous depths and lamenting highlights of the bassoon”)

Jean Francaix was put up to his 1948 *Quintet No. 1* by the horn player of the Aulos Quintet, who asked for (and got) a “very demanding piece.” The composer obviously had fun complying with that order. He wrote, “I am by nature a peaceable sort of person, but while composing it I made great efforts to give as malevolent an impression as possible.”

Perhaps not so malevolent as witty, brash and cheeky, the first movement of the *Quintet* begins with woozy sounds, continues with horn giggles and ends with a rude final unison. The second is vaudevillian with a maudlin waltz that keeps unraveling. The *Tema e variazioni* is just weird, while the concluding *Tempo di marcia francese* (what's a French March?) features barnyard noises, horn fanfares and cuckoo mating calls and ends with a “that's all, folks” gesture. The Berliners gleefully dispatched this eminently entertaining piece with all the requisite *élan*.

Czech composer Pavel Haas was a significant loss to music when he perished at Auschwitz in 1944. His *Quintet, op. 10* dates from 1929 and shows a thirty-year-old composer paying homage to his mentor, Leoš Janáček, while cultivating his own musical *persona*. The *Preludio* is built on a persistent motif passed around through all the instruments. The *Preghiera (Prayer)* is urgent and middle-eastern in flavor. The *Ballo eccentrico* is just that, with the new sounds of piccolo and E-flat clarinet heard over a bassoon ostinato and curious sinking passages. The work concludes with an *Epilogo* characterized by unisons, clever chord spacings and a sudden, consonant ending. The Berliners brought out all the work's beguiling strangeness in a well-paced, committed performance.

The Haas *Quintet* was scheduled for the Berlin Quintet's visit in 2010 but scuttled because regulations prevented the clarinetist from bringing multiple instruments onboard their flight! That inanity having apparently been resolved, it was well worth the wait to be able to hear this fascinating piece.

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