BlueWater Chamber Orchestra with Charles Latshaw, Emily Cornelius & Linda Atherton (Feb. 27)

by Daniel Hathaway

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra welcomed guest conductor Charles Latshaw to the podium at the Breen Center in Ohio City on Saturday, February 27. The concert featured two of its own members, violinist Emily Cornelius and cellist Linda Atherton, in the double concerto by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. An Arriaga overture and a Beethoven symphony completed the 70-minute performance, played without intermission.

Zwilich's *Concerto for violin, cello and orchestra* was composed for Jaime Laredo and Sharon Robinson (now faculty members at the Cleveland Institute of Music) on commission by the Louisville Symphony, who premiered it in 1991. It's a friendly piece both for the audience and the soloists, who spend a fair amount of time amiably playing together, although there's a significant amount of drama that goes on between the two of them, and between the soloists and orchestra.

Movements are usually labeled with directions like "Allegro con brio" or "Andante," but the two movements of Zwilich's concerto are identified only by metronome markings: Quarter note = c. 72 for the first, Quarter note = 132 for the second. And by way of content, the composer notes that "the first begins lyrically, becomes agitated, then returns to a quiet close. The second is just the reverse."

Cornelius and Atherton were well-matched as soloists, teaming up skillfully as well as sparking some intriguing back-and-forth dialogues with the orchestra in the first movement. Their handsome tone and fine intonation carried well through the ensemble

and into the hall. Latshaw and the orchestra kept in close touch, and Martin Neubert and Cynthia Warren added fine oboe and English horn commentary.

The second movement begins in a flurry of winds, and animated passages alternate with stretches of calm. Little melodic cells initiated by Cornelius and Atherton infected both the orchestra and the soloists. A rhythmic groove emerges with skittering gestures from the soloists pitted against trumpets and winds. Timpani strokes return to bring the piece to a conclusion with gestures that recall the beginning of the concerto.

During the warm ovation, an over-eager stagehand bent on removing the cello platform found himself taking an unplanned bow along with the deserving soloists.

The concert opened with Jean Crisóstomo Arriaga's *Overture to Los Esclavos Felices,* a now-lost opera the Spanish composer wrote at the age of 13 (he died six years later). Graceful and Rossini-like in character, it holds a surprise in its false ending, which goes on to something of a *petite reprise* of earlier material. Latshaw and the orchestra gave it a perky performance.

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4 in B-flat* seems like a throwback coming between the Eroica and the Fifth*,* but its charm is infectious and its sophistication seems even to top some of Haydn's wittiest essays in the symphonic genre. After a slow introduction beautifully shaped by the winds, Latshaw, conducting without score, set a brisk pace for the first movement. BlueWater's playing was trim, transparent and confident.

A fine clarinet solo by Amitai Vardi answered later by bassoonist George Sakakeeny distinguished the Adagio. While the third movement scherzo could have used a bit more melodic shape and sense of destination, the finale was thrilling. Latshaw took its "Allegro ma non troppo" marking advisedly, setting a tempo which would have been daunting for less experienced players. No problem there for BlueWater. To single out only one performer whose work was exemplary, George Sakakeeny blazed through his tricky bassoon solo with poise and grace.

As Latshaw pointed out before the symphony, Emily Cornelius and Linda Atherton could have gone home after the concerto, a job well done. Instead, they took their normal chairs in the ensemble to play the Beethoven. That says a lot about the culture of BlueWater Chamber Orchestra.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com *March 15, 2016.*
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