

Review**Heights Chamber Orchestra with violist
Jeffrey Irvine at Grace Lutheran (February 17)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Northeast Ohio abounds in avocational, community orchestras — more it would seem than most regions of the country can boast. One such ensemble, Heights Chamber Orchestra, now celebrating its thirtieth anniversary (with seven of its founding members still active and featured on its program cover), gave the third concert of its season on Sunday, February 17 at Grace Lutheran Church in Cleveland Heights. The imaginative program, conceived and conducted by music director Anthony Addison, was built around Lionel Tertis's adaptation of the Elgar *Cello Concerto*, with CIM viola professor Jeffrey Irvine as soloist. The concert was dedicated to the late Edward Ormond, former first assistant principal violist with the Cleveland Orchestra, who played with HCO after his retirement.

Instrumentalists are fond of poaching each others' sonatas and concertos — think of César Franck's *Violin Sonata*, which has been successfully appropriated by cellists (and perhaps less convincingly by flutists). In this case, the translation from cello to viola by the foremost British violist of his era was vetted and approved by Elgar himself.

Any heft and intensity the viola version loses it gains in clarity and grace, not to mention sheer audibility. In the cello version, the soloist is up against a dense orchestration, and usually an orchestra of Edwardian proportions. Irvine's tone carried easily over the smaller ensemble of strings, and winds and brass took care not to overbalance the soloist.

After a slightly tentative start, the HCO contributed sonorous and spirited playing of Elgar's broad themes and reliable ensemble support to the soloist. Irvine played with assurance, excellent technique and a refreshing humility. Addison did a good job of keeping things together in a space with tricky sight lines and dim lighting.

The Elgar was preceded by a special, thirtieth anniversary commission composed by Monica Houghton. Houghton's *Fanfare!* began subtly with a violin solo over timpani and ended with a double bass pizzicato (the “!” in the title). A gentle and episodic set of variations, it turned into a dance in the middle and tickled the ear throughout its brief duration. The composer was on hand to take a bow.

The second half of the program moved across the Channel to France for Fauré's Suite *Masques et Bergamasques*, Chausson's Suite *La Tempête* and Thomas's *Overture to Mignon*, giving the orchestra an opportunity to shine on its own.

Winds and strings blended nicely in the *Ouverture* of the Fauré, and winds sounded lovely in the *Menuet*. Though the *Gavotte* was a bit heavy-footed, the *Pastorale* swayed along agreeably. A tuba on the bass line in some passages was a surprising addition.

Winds also figured prominently in the Chausson, with fine solos by founding members Susan Blackwell, oboe, and Linda Madsen, flute (a long and eloquent cadenza at the beginning of the *Danse rustique*).

Ending a concert with an overture seemed a bit topsy-turvey, but Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon* made a delightful, operatic dessert.

HCO's next concert will feature soprano Natasha Ospina Simmons in music by Berlioz and Weber on April 7 at 3:30, also at Grace Lutheran.

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