

Review**Blue Streak Ensemble at Nighttown (July 15)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Composer Margaret Brouwer's Blue Streak Ensemble visited Nighttown in Cleveland Heights on Monday, July 15 to preview the concert it would give the next evening in Hoover Auditorium at Lakeside. Two more disparate venues would be hard to imagine — an intimate room in a restaurant/jazz club and an auditorium you could park a Boeing 777 in — but the delightful playlist would work well under any circumstances, and was perfect for a summer evening, whether on Cedar Road or on the shores of Lake Erie.

Brouwer designed Blue Streak as an ensemble that would play summer concerts on the Lake (it gets its name from the famous roller coaster at Cedar Point) as well as a vehicle for performing her own compositions and arrangements of works by other classical composers (above: the 2012 ensemble). The personnel changes a bit from season to season. Monday's group included Jinjoo Cho, violin, Irwin Shung, piano, Maaike Harding, cello, Sarah Beaty, mezzo-soprano and Robert Davis, clarinet, who played three contrasting pieces by Brouwer, plus movements from a suite by Milhaud, Brouwer's arrangement of a well-known Rossini aria, Dvořák's own arrangement for cello and piano of his *Silent Woods*, a duo for clarinet and bassoon attributed to Beethoven repurposed for clarinet and cello, a virtuosic cello piece by Turtle Island Quartet cellist Mark Summer, and three arias from *Porgy and Bess*, two of them in virtuosic violin and piano arrangements by Jascha Heifetz written for recital encores.

Operating in close quarters with dicey sight lines, Cho, Davis and Shung opened the set with a brilliant and incisive performance of the first movement of Darius Milhaud's 1936 *Suite*, later revisiting two subsequent movements, *Divertissement*, a slower one which involved the piano only halfway through and *Jeu*, a rhythmically interesting one that was actually a duo for violin and clarinet. Milhaud's prolific output comprises nearly 450 opus numbers and there's a lot of similarity between individual pieces, but his bubbly Gallic

wit and general avoidance of strong dissonance makes his music genial and listenable — and a fine choice for these circumstances.

Genial and listenable would also go a long way toward describing Brouwer's own music, though there are clear individual differences in color, texture and inspiration between *A Joyful Moment*, *Whom Do You Call Angel Now?* and *Deserted Delphi, Veiled in Mist*. *Joyful Moment* neatly encapsulated a whole range of feelings upon hearing of a successful birth in the family after a difficult pregnancy. *Angel* was particularly affecting. Based on a 9/11 poem by David Adams, Brouwer's setting was masterful in its clear and lyrical text setting, poignantly declaimed in turn by Sarah Beaty. The quasi-minimalist textures in *Delphi* were evocative of a famous site visited under magical conditions, and Beaty's haunting, wordless lines added much to that picture. To her great credit, Margaret Brouwer always knows how long to sustain an idea and exactly when to bring a piece to its conclusion. Other composers: take note.

Interspersed among the Brouwer pieces were lovely moments for individual performers. Sarah Beaty was the model of *bel canto* clarity and brilliance in Rossini's *Una voce poco fa* from *Barber of Seville*. Cellist Maaïke Harding created an evocative scene in Dvořák's *Silent Woods* and (after a minor accident when her end pin slipped and she had to begin again) was perfectly riveting in her account of Summer's demanding *Julie-O*. Beaty sang a lovely version of *Summertime* to begin the Gershwin set after which Jinjoo Cho dug into a surging account of *Bess, You Is My Woman* and wailed away like a diva in *It Ain't Necessarily So*. Erwin Shung, who didn't quite get inside the Gershwin style, earlier contributed a creditable performance of Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in c minor*. Harding and Davis lightened the mood at one point with a charming reading of the Beethoven *Duo*, which worked well enough but is more characteristic with clarinet and bassoon.

This delightful evening owed a lot to the skill of the performers but just as much to Margaret Brouwer's sensitivity in creating a musical smorgasbord that made sense and worked. A twenty-first century salon-type evening makes a refreshing alternative to standard chamber music fare, and Brouwer and her performers pulled this one off with charm and style.

Published on clevelandclassical.com July 16, 2013