

Review**Warren Philharmonic with bassist Susan Hagen
at Christ Episcopal Church (November 3)**

by Robert Rollin



This past Sunday's Warren Philharmonic Orchestra concert took place in the sunlit Christ Episcopal Church, and featured a potpourri of ingratiating short pieces conducted by Susan Davenny Wyner. The highlight was a performance of Giovanni Bottesini's *Concerto No. 2 in B Minor for Double Bass and Orchestra* by Boston area bassist, Susan Hagen. Hagen trained at Boston University under Edwin Barker, principal bass of the Boston Symphony. She has served for eight years as extra bass with Boston, is currently a member of the Boston Pops Orchestra, and a faculty member at the Boston Conservatory of Music.

Bottesini (1821-1889) entered the Milan Conservatory at fourteen as a scholarship student, graduating four years later after winning a three hundred franc prize for his bass playing. He was soon designated "the Paganini of the bass" for his virtuosity. Bottesini had a huge following and regularly added new original show-pieces to his repertoire. He became principal bass at a Venetian theater where Verdi's opera, *I due Foscari* was being performed. The two composers became lifelong friends. Though highly respected as a double bassist, Bottesini also acquired a European following as an opera conductor, and composed thirteen operas. He is best known for his virtuosic and idiomatic bass writing in the concertos that continue to be played today.

The *B Minor Concerto*, scored for one flute, two oboes, two horns, timpani and strings, is a lovely piece, replete with lively themes, expressive romantic tunes, and spectacular feats of technical dexterity. Hagen began the first movement, *Allegro*, with a lovely tune, echoed periodically by the violins. There were many delightful sequences that culminated in an appealing circle progression supported by moving perfect fourths in the orchestra bass line. After an oboe solo, an attractive solo flute imitated lines in the solo double bass. Hagen played a gorgeous solo cadenza full of rapid sixteenths to close the movement.

The woodwinds alone joined forces to begin the colorful *Andante*. Hagen played tasteful and expressive harmonic passages to enliven the lyric flavor.

The final *Allegro* highlighted some attractive counterpoint, with fine high register bassoons playing an important role. Hagen's performance was excellent, though one longed

for a wider dynamic range in her sound, which sometimes struggled to be heard. The orchestra accompanied effectively throughout.

Three tasty morsels made up the balance of the first half. Carl Maria von Weber's *Abu Hassan Overture* was as boisterously cheerful as it was brief. The opera, based on a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* necessitated using the Arabic marching band sound of Janissary percussion. The three-minute piece was a delight.

Béla Bartók's *Rumanian Folk Dances* were even more entrancing. The six movements flowed together without pause. A fast, slow, fast structure, superimposed on the piece helped maintain interest. Fine solos in piccolo, clarinet, and two paired French horns ornamented an attractive first-movement modal treatment. The entire performance sparkled.

Manuel de Falla's *Ritual Fire Dance*, from the ballet *El Amor brujo*, depicted the gypsy exorcism of a ghostly ex-lover who keeps appearing to discourage two young lovers from marrying. The performance was terrific and included wonderful soloistic interchanges among oboe, paired horns, B-flat clarinet, and low register flute. Don Yallech's excellent timpani playing added the requisite power and punch.

The second half performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Air* from *Suite No. 3 in D Major, BWV 1068*, sometimes called *Air on the G String*, was truly inspired. The version was for strings alone, and the hushed beauty swept up the audience in its wake. Mozart's *Symphony No 35 in D Major, K. 385, the Haffner*, with its frothy lightness, seemed anticlimactic in comparison.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 5, 2013