

**Review: ChamberFest Cleveland —
3X in Mixon Hall (June 29)**



by Nicholas Jones

Three has been the magic number throughout ChamberFest 2014, and nowhere more than in its closing concert in CIM's Mixon Hall on Sunday afternoon. The music was rich and, as usual with ChamberFest, the musicianship masterful. This very enjoyable program, titled "3X," included three works, each featuring instruments in multiples of three.

The contribution of "three" was the well-known Beethoven *Piano Trio in D, opus 70*, known as the "Ghost." Like other chamber works from Beethoven's middle period, the "Ghost" is intense, full of contrasts that surprise and excite. Violinist Diana Cohen (ChamberFest's artistic and executive director), cellist Gabriel Cabezas, and pianist Orion Weiss gave a performance that brought out both the strength and the subtlety of the piece.

Especially notable was the ensemble's grasp of the big picture of Beethoven's structures, leading us through quiet moments that intrigued the ear, into extended passages of growing complexity and intensity, and on to forceful culminations. Weiss's mastery of the challenging piano part matched his evident enjoyment of its flourishes and intricacies. The second movement with its "ghostly" premonitions was the emotional highpoint of the piece, despite some initial rhythmic uncertainty.

Three squared makes nine, the number of string players in *Last Round* by Argentine-born composer Osvaldo Golijov, which preceded the Beethoven in the program. Written in 1996, it is a musical homage to the late composer Astor Piazzolla, known for his fusion of classical and tango styles. The title seems to be an elaborate pun, referring to "rounds" in music, in drinking, and in boxing (Piazzolla apparently having been rather pugnacious). Here, two string quartets face off on stage, a single double bass at the rear alternatively refereeing and urging them on.



The first movement incorporates the visceral energy of a tango, the two quartets punching away at each other (musically — no actual blows were exchanged). After a startling transition, the second movement closes the piece — rounds it off, one might say — in an entirely different mood. Played *lentissimo* — as slow as possible — the movement has a fierce melancholy. Overall, *Last Round* is an exciting and heartfelt memorial to the composer's fellow Latin American.

Between three and nine in the series comes six. The final piece of the concert, accordingly, was a sextet -- Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*, opus 70. Written after a spring spent in Italy, this is chamber music that more than filled a room as large as Mixon Hall. Tchaikovsky has added an extra viola and an extra cello to the standard string quartet, and the sound was — as they say in the stereo stores — "monster." The dynamic violinist Yura Lee led the group, supported by fellow violinist Noah Bendix-Balgley, Yehonatan Berick and Dimitri Murrath on viola, and Julie Albers and Robert deMaine on cello.

The first two movements were, respectively, graceful and passionate, each seeming saturated with Italian sunlight. The last two movements, by contrast, were notably Russian in tone — modal, angular, and shadowed. Motifs were tossed with almost manic energy up and down the registers of the six instruments. While Tchaikovsky's lush music can sound overdone, the precision and collective ensemble of this performance brought out both the music's Romantic power and also its freshness and zest. *Souvenir de Florence* may not be a great chamber work, but it was a stirring finale for the festival.



ChamberFest 2014 has brought extraordinary chamber players to Cleveland and let them loose on some very interesting pieces, presented with intelligence and taste in fascinating programs. As Patrick Castillo said in his pre-concert talk, the mark of good programming is to imagine works that have a lot to say to each other. Certainly that was true here. These three works, from very different periods and cultures, collectively illuminated the musical potential of Romantic string playing: imbued with contrast, energy, dance, and bravado.

We are fortunate to have had three wonderful seasons of Diana and Frank Cohen's brainchild: may ChamberFest 2015 flourish as well!

Photos by Gary Adams.

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