

Review: Blue Water Chamber Orchestra with pianist Zsolt Bognár at The Breen (September 6)

by Daniel Hathaway



What could be more delightful than two sparkling early Beethoven works featuring a riveting young pianist and a fine chamber orchestra, all wrapped up in a 75-minute concert format and presented without intermission? That was the recipe for success as the Blue Water Chamber Orchestra opened its latest season on Saturday evening, September 6 at the Breen Center in Ohio City. The program consisted of Beethoven's first symphony and first piano concerto, with Cleveland pianist Zsolt Bognár at the Steinway and music director Carlton Woods on the podium.

Early it may be, but Beethoven's first essay in the symphony is full of surprises (it begins in the composer's best bad-boy style on a dominant seventh chord) and equally full of pitfalls both for orchestra and conductor. Blue Water played with cohesive sound and tight ensemble through the whole piece, and its violin section tossed off tricky transitions like the lead-in to the fourth movement *allegro* with consummate ease. Only the element of surprise went missing from some of the composer's twists and turns.

With only a brief pause to wheel the piano onstage, the concert culminated in a fresh and vital performance of Beethoven's first piano concerto — which as Woods pointed out was really his second, “but let's not get into that”.

Bognár played with a sure command of notes and technique, but his rich and subtle variety of nuances and his sense of scale really put the piece across. This was a thoughtful, transparent, chamber orchestra-sized performance, not one where the soloist wields Lisztian power against a small ensemble — like showing up with a Maserati for a bicycle race (as one of my mentors once put it in a master class). Woods and the orchestra played as brilliantly with Bognár as the pianist did with them. Clarinetist Amitai Vardi distinguished himself with eloquent solo work in the slow movement.

The soloist won a hearty ovation from the large audience — as well as three large bouquets which reposed colorfully on the cheek of the piano as he gave the crowd an encore. Schubert's *Klavierstück in e-flat minor, D. 946, #1* explored another side of Bognár's pianistic personality. Warmly voiced and both urgent and lyrical, the not-so-short work made a fine contrast at the end of an evening full of crystalline C Major.

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