

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra at Plymouth Church (November 1)

by Daniel Hathaway



Carlton Woods and BlueWater Chamber Orchestra had a fine time celebrating the Halloween weekend in their concert at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights on Saturday evening. The featured work on the program was Jon Deak's *The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow*, an action-packed concerto for string quartet and orchestra, with narration read by WCLV president Robert Conrad.

Deak, who played associate principal bass for many seasons with the New York Philharmonic and has more than 300 compositions to his credit, brought Washington Irving's *Legend* to life in vividly pictorial music — with the help of a variety of sound effects and a whole lot of percussion. And the individual personalities of that solo string quartet, whose Homburg-hatted violinists (Kenneth Johnston and Charles Morey) together represented the conflicted personality of Ichabod Crane. To fill out the cast, violist Kirsten Docter took the role of the demure Katrina, and cellist Bryan Dumm, wearing a coonskin cap, channeled the thuggish Brom Bones.

Musically, the piece was a hoot. The ballroom scene wonderfully contrasted the elegant footwork of Ichabod and the woeful gallumphings of Brom, and the climactic ride through Sleepy Hollow was chillingly suspenseful. The orchestra played splendidly when not otherwise occupied in contributing special effects like wind noises blown through cupped hands. Conrad was a predictably distinguished narrator, though there were some long gaps in the score between his pronouncements (not his fault). It was amusing to walk through the detritus of some of the percussion effects on the way out — a pile of metal pipes revealed the source of some of the cataclysmic noises we had just heard.

The program, presented without intermission, began with Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, followed by Respighi's Botticelli Triptych.

The Debussy was billed as having been arranged by Benno Sachs, a Viennese physician and amateur musical enthusiast. In 1921, Sachs cunningly reduced Debussy's full orchestration to a mere eleven players — flute, oboe, clarinet, string quintet, piano, harmonium and antique cymbals — for Erwin Stein's Society for Private Music Performances. It was never performed because of the hyperinflationary economic situation in Austria.

As it turned out, what we heard on Saturday wasn't quite Sachs's version. Woods added harp to the ensemble (since the excellent Jody Guinn was already on hand) and brought into play the whole complement of BlueWater's strings. Sachs's harmonium and piano parts — which stood in for Debussy's horns and harp — seemed both to be played by an electronic keyboard.

Sean Gabriel performed the famous flute solo with pellucid expressiveness. Though the orchestra played with sumptuous tone, balances with the winds were out of kilter because of the large string section. If the faun's reverie seemed sluggish rather than enchanted, too many audible beats in some bars may have been to blame.

Respighi's colorful *Trittico Botticelliano* boasted excellent orchestral playing throughout. In its middle movement, "The Adoration of the Magi," George Sakakeeny contributed a lovely bassoon solo, later joined by oboist Martin Neubert. Once again, the broad musical sweep some passages needed to take flight seemed grounded by overzealous time beating.

Photo: cellist Bryan Dumm (in coonskin) rehearsing The Headless Horsemen (BlueWater Chamber Orchestra).

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