

May Wine from Blue Water Chamber Orchestra at Plymouth Church (May 9)

by Nicholas Jones



May Wine is a delightful spring punch made out of a bit of everything — the fruitiness of Riesling, the bubbly of Prosecco, the tart bite of strawberries, and the sweet pungency of the flowers and leaves of woodruff (also wonderfully known as sweet-scented bedstraw), blooming now in northern Ohio. For their final concert of their fifth season, the BlueWater Chamber Orchestra

served up a bowl of musical May wine, more than welcome on one of the first warm evenings of the season.

A fine bottle was opened early in the concert, as principal bassoon (and Oberlin professor) George Sakakeeny soloed in Libby Larsen's *Full Moon in the City*. The piece, commissioned by Oberlin two years ago for Sakakeeny, imagines the bassoon as a late-night wanderer walking aimlessly (and perhaps a bit tipsily?) down city streets, passing the occasional jazz club, stepping into a diner with a juke box playing pop music. To set the mood, Larsen includes snatches of "moon"-related songs, from Henry Mancini's dreamy "Moon River" to Van Morrison's upbeat "Moondance" and David Bowie's edgy "Space Oddity." As in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, one never knows what the promenade will bring next.

A melancholy (reminiscent of Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks") hangs just behind the surface, but a tender whimsy keeps the mood from becoming too indigo. Sakakeeny inhabited the solo part, playing with total confidence and ease, even when Larsen dealt him some meteoric runs and notes of celestial altitude. The strings of BlueWater accompanied Sakakeeny with nuance and obvious pleasure.

Wouldn't some May wine be just the thing for an excursion to the forest, perhaps on a break in the hunt? Following the Larsen was Paul Dukas's outdoorsy *Villanelle* for horn

and orchestra. (How often do you hear concertos for bassoon and horn on the same concert?) Ken Wadenpfohl, principal horn in BlueWater, tackled the formidable solo part with confidence and skill, playing with appropriate gusto through an obstacle course of virtuosic demands (the work was written as an examination piece for hornists at the Paris Conservatory).



The bubbliest ingredient in the punch was put in last: Schubert's third symphony, written when the composer was an 18-year-old and obviously enjoying life (and perhaps the occasional glass of Maiwein). The work — not yet of the “heavenly length” of later Schubert — was a good choice for BlueWater's programming (the concert was presented without intermission, and lasted only about 75 minutes). Under the spirited conducting of Carlton Woods, the performance was exuberant and tuneful, full of an unabashed, adolescent bumptiousness. Within the fairly conventional musical structure were nice surprises — as when the forceful minuet suddenly became a courtly waltz featuring solo oboe (Martin Neubert) and solo bassoon (Sakakeeny). Much of the effervescence of the performance was due to the animated and sensitive playing of principal clarinet Amitai Vardi, a faculty member at Kent State University.

Schubert's energetic writing tempted Woods to allow the orchestra to overplay in such a resonant hall. There are a lot of sudden loud spots (*sforzandi*) in the score, and the cumulative effect in this performance was too often to ramp up the volume, and on occasion, to push the cadential chords out of tune.

The opening piece on the program was a commissioned work by Jason Thorpe Buchanan, winner of the 2014 Iron Composer competition at the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory. With typographic as well as musical innovation, it was titled “De/ter | lior.ation.” Buchanan conducted his own work with clarity. About as far from Schubert as one could

get, the work had surges of rhythmic energy combined with a consistent avoidance of pitch.



Instrumentalists were issued Styrofoam cups, and various ingenious uses were in evidence, including bowing the edge of the cup (producing a thin whistly sound) and fingering the strings on a viola with the cup (resulting in a mushy, indeterminate pitch); I couldn't see what the winds and brass were doing with their cups. The composer's seriousness of intent was evident throughout. Buchanan's commitment to a deconstructive orchestral mode opened the evening on an edgy note.

BlueWater has announced its four-concert season for next year, alternating between the Breen Center and Plymouth Church. Highlights include Grammy-winning guitarist Jason Vieaux playing Rodrigo; a program of French music featuring BlueWater flutists Sean Gabriel and Linda White; BlueWater violinist Emily Cornelius and cellist Linda Atherton playing the double concerto by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, with Beethoven's fourth symphony; and a performance of Beethoven's incidental music for Goethe's *Egmont*, with soprano Marian Vogel and narrator Joe Wendel.



Woodruff

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