

ChamberFest Cleveland 2015: opening concert at SPACES (June 17)



by Timothy Robson

In its first three seasons, ChamberFest Cleveland made itself an indispensable set of summer events that helped satisfy the seemingly insatiable appetite for chamber music in Cleveland. Organized by Cleveland Orchestra principal clarinet Franklin Cohen and Diana Cohen, concertmaster of the Calgary Philharmonic, this year's fourth festival has expanded to ten concerts over a two-week period in late June, in six venues, some of them traditional concert halls, others, more unusual sites.

The Cohens have created a family atmosphere for the festival by hand-picking national and international musical collaborators. The concerts are prepared before and during the festival. The very high level of performance is a mark of the musicianship of the participants.

Each year the festival adopts a theme. This year it is "Crossing Borders," and the organizers have interpreted it in the broadest possible way, including geographic, time and life experience, and musical genres.

The title of the 2015 sold-out opening concert on Wednesday, June 17, was "Down the Danube," an imaginary musical tour through time and space from Mozart's Vienna to George Enescu's Romania. The venue was SPACES Gallery on the Superior Viaduct just west of downtown Cleveland. The gallery is intimate. It is also not air-conditioned, so the faithful listeners were packed into a sweltering, windowless space. Prior to the program, Frank Cohen distributed fans to audience members.

But those who endured reaped great rewards. There was not a weak moment in the superbly inventive program. A hallmark of ChamberFest Cleveland is its eclectic mix of

unfamiliar works by well-known composers as well as works by unfamiliar composers. In this case, György Ligeti and George Enescu were balanced with Mozart, Bartók and Dvořák.

Mozart's *Quintet in E-flat major for horn and strings*, K. 407, is a miniature horn concerto in everything but title. There is interplay between the horn and the string quartet (which, unusually, uses one violin, two violas and cello, creating a richer musical texture), but the horn dominates the structure of the piece. Pittsburgh Symphony principal horn William Caballero brilliantly combined impeccable technique in the virtuoso horn part as well as his musical interaction with the other performers, especially violinist Alexi Kenney, who played with a sure sense of phrasing. The thematic interest lies mainly in the violin and horn. The other strings (Yu Jin and Dimitri Murrath, violas, and Peter Wiley, cello) played a more supporting role.

Violinists Jinjoo Cho and Amy Schwartz Moretti played excerpts from Béla Bartók's remarkable set of pedagogical pieces, *Duos for Two Violins*, which varied in mood from serene to rustic and harsh, and in difficulty from simple diatonic melodies to multi-meter Hungarian dances. Cho and Moretti made a fine case for moving the *Duos* out of the teaching studio and into the concert hall. They followed the short Bartók movements with Ligeti's *Ballad and Dance for Two Violins*, which was clearly influenced by the same folk music as Bartók's pieces. The ballad was calm and melodic; the dance was wild in its metrical complexity.

On a program of unusual works, Dvořák's *Bagatelles for Two Violins, Cello and Harmonium*, op. 47, was a real curiosity. The charming four-movement suite was in Dvořák's most melodic Bohemian mode. Violinists Jinjoo Cho and Mari Sato and cellist Julie Albers were joined by Roman Rabinovich at the harmonium, a keyboard instrument popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Similar in sound to an organ, the tone is produced by vibrating reeds in the case and the air by the player pumping a pedal. The harmonium used here was petite and was amplified slightly. SPACES proved to be an ideal venue for these small-scale movements, and the harmonium probably would have been heard without the amplification.

The string players have the thematic and melodic interest, and although occasionally the harmonium picks up one or another of the melodies briefly, the sustained tones of the harmonium mostly provide harmonic underpinning. The players were attuned to the lightness and fluidity of Dvořák's writing. The complex fourth movement canon especially pointed out the synergy among the musicians. The final Allegro was a polka, albeit with its rough edges smoothed over a bit more in this performance than Dvořák may have intended.

After an extended intermission that allowed the audience time to go outside for a breath of cool air, many of the previous musicians (Cho, Kenney, Moretti, Murrath, Albers) were joined by violinist Yura Lee, violist Hsin-Yun Huang, and cellist Clive Greensmith for George Enescu's monumental *Octet in C major for Strings*, op. 7. This rarely-performed work in four technically and musically difficult movements is played without pause. (The performers did pause briefly between the first and second movements, mostly to wipe the sweat from their brows.)

The *Octet* was the sole work on the program that could have benefitted from a larger room. The sound of the eight strings at full volume brought a thrilling immediacy to the performance, but a more robust acoustical space would have given the sound more cohesion. The work has many contrasting passages, sometimes with a feeling of repose and unison melodies; at other times there is slashing violence and harshness. The players were attuned to these often sudden changes in the mood of the music. The third movement was a long arch, building in tension, then releasing. It was beautifully played, but a longer rehearsal gestation would have allowed it to jell even more fully. No placid Viennese affair, the fourth movement waltz is violent, with each instrument playing more or less independently of the others. At the end, a long cello pedal-point on the tonic note underpins a long crescendo to an ultimately glorious C major conclusion, a fitting ending to this fine opening concert.

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