

CityMusic Cleveland with Stefan Willich at Lakewood Congregational (December 13)

by Nicholas Jones



The temperature outside was a balmy 60 degrees when CityMusic Cleveland presented its December program. I attended the last of five concerts, on Sunday, December 13 in Lakewood; others were scattered around the area from Elyria to Willoughby Hills. While it was a pleasure not to have to negotiate a Polar Vortex in getting to the concert, once inside, I was happy to experience winter in the milder form of Antonio Vivaldi's brilliant program music from *The Four Seasons*.

Vivaldi's violin concerto is full of word-painting about the chilling wind and the slippery streets of winter. Its ambitious program makes serious demands on the solo violin. Thirty-second notes (eight to a beat!) sweep through the concerto — brilliant scale passages evoking winter's chilly winds, rapid stutters that sound like chattering teeth, and dropping arpeggios that mimic the pratfalls of hapless walkers on the icy streets. Miho Hashizume, CityMusic's concertmaster and a member of The Cleveland Orchestra, gave a vibrant and masterful rendition of the perils and pleasures of the season.

Preceding Vivaldi's "Winter" in the first half of the concert was Franz Josef Haydn's *Sinfonia Concertante* in B flat major, essentially a concerto for four instruments featuring violinist Miho Hashizume, oboist Eric Ohlsson, cellist Sophie Benn, and bassoonist Laura Koepke. While Hashizume played the lead, all four soloists had substantial roles, with lots of duets and quartets and, near the end, some grand virtuosic licks for each. The piece itself is a lovely tour through late-18th century styles: the first movement is an example of mature Haydn orchestration, engaging and varied in texture;

the second movement Andante is gracefully *galante*; and the finale thunders out in the declamatory style of the early-Romantic *Sturm und Drang*.

It was a particular pleasure to hear the bassoon and cello as soloists, more than holding their own with the violin and oboe. In Laura Koepke's hands, the bassoon solos were especially notable for their clarity and sense of line. Sophie Benn's expressive cello playing reminded me of the power of Haydn's more well-known cello concertos.



In this concert, CityMusic was conducted by the German cardiologist Stefan Willich, who founded the World Doctors Orchestra, a philanthropic ensemble. Willich has a clear beat and an obvious love of the music, but his conducting in this concert lacked nuance: while his forceful gestures moments successfully pulled a big sound from the orchestra, more lyrical passages seemed overly square.

An outlier in this concert of mostly 18th-century music came just after intermission and before the Mozart: an evocation of spring in Buenos Aires by Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla, known for his tango-infused music. Originally featuring the composer's own instrument, the accordion-like *bandoneón*, this short piece was recast for solo violin (by Leonid Desyatnikov, for the violinist Gidon Kremer). Again, Hashizume took the solo part and evoked a variety of contrasting colors and tones from the jaunty to the lyrical and passionate.

The big piece of the second half was Mozart's *Symphony No. 41 in C*, the "Jupiter." This masterpiece, full of Mozart's overflowing inventiveness, is well suited to the CityMusic chamber orchestra. The relatively small string sections played with vibrancy and were nicely balanced with the woodwinds. Brandy Hudelson, the single flutist, played with grace and sparkle, and pairs of trumpets and horns added force and color. Willich prepped the audience nicely before the Mozart by having the violins play the major themes of the complicated double fugue of the finale.

Unfortunately, CityMusic's sound was too often unbalanced on Sunday. In the Vivaldi, the lovely Largo was nearly overwhelmed by too much volume in the violas and cellos, and in the Mozart, the brass and timpani were often too loud.

Lakewood Congregational Church was filled to overflowing for this free concert, and it was good to see a number of children and young people among the usual grey-haired crowd. Though the concert stretched to a full two hours — a bit much for a Sunday

afternoon — the audience's ovation at the end of the Mozart was as warm as the weather outside.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 21, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)