

## Rocky River Chamber Music Society: Ensemble HD, “Cabaret: Between Two World Wars” (Feb. 1)

by Christine Jay



Can you successfully bring bar music into the concert hall? Cleveland Orchestra principal flutist Joshua Smith and Ensemble HD say, yes we can. Presented by the Rocky River Chamber Music Society on February 1 at the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, the ensemble performed their concert titled “Cabaret : Between Two World Wars.”

Smith, the narrator for most of the evening, explained that Ensemble HD got its start at the

Cleveland bar Happy Dog. In their efforts “to bring the Happy Dog experience into the concert hall,” Smith said, the program was conceived as a cabaret, the six performers sitting onstage and verbally introducing their pieces to the audience. He also described the program as “jumping off a diving-board” into the historical period between the two world wars. The evening featured repertoire written between 1910 and 1936 by European composers who embraced the musical identities of their respective countries.

The evening began with Leoš Janáček’s *Pohádka for Cello and Piano* (1910) performed by Cleveland Orchestra cellist Charles Bernard and pianist Christina Dahl. The duo played with nuance and musicality, Dahl’s playing especially lush and sensitive, as it was throughout the program.

Max Reger’s *Suite in g for Solo Viola* (1915) followed, delivered fearlessly from memory by violist Joanna Patterson Zakany. Smith said that Reger, searching for a German musical identity, emulated J.S. Bach’s music. The result is perhaps an updated Bach, the sound both tortured and romantic while still harkening back to the earlier composer’s partitas and suites for solo instruments. Zakany excelled in her performance of the work, her full-bodied sound filling the hall.

Another powerhouse performance featured Cleveland Orchestra associate concertmaster Amy Lee in Claude Debussy's *Violin Sonata in g* (1917). Smith noted that the sonata, Debussy's last major composition, takes its inspiration from the French Baroque composer François Couperin. The demanding tour-de-force for the soloist led some audience members to whisper, "Wow." Debussy's masterful writing allowed Lee to display her marvelous tone and exquisite technical ability. Yelps and hearty applause ensued from the full-house crowd.

The night continued with Benjamin Britten's *Temporal Variations for Oboe and Piano* (1936). Christina Dahl and TCO principal oboe Frank Rosenwein gave an exacting performance. The piece, described by Rosenwein as a set of variations on a funeral march theme, exhibited his timbral palette from the inquisitive to the demon duck. However distinctive, the piece meanders, and Rosenwein's final note was a welcome relief.

Smith explained that Edgar Varèse's *Density 21.5 for Solo Flute* (1936) is a "celebration of the machine age." Named after the density of platinum, the composition commemorates the 20th century's first platinum flutes. Sheepishly, Smith added, "This is the first time I've played it in public." The audience giggled, sympathetic to the performer's plight. Smith's delivery was masterful, his final note lingering in the hall.

In the final piece, Zoltán Kodály's *Duo for Violin and Cello*, Op. 7 (1936), Lee and Bernard proved an excellent duo, playing as if in conversation. Its undulating melody soon grew too familiar. At the piece's conclusion, the gentlemen next to the reviewer whispered, "Can we leave now?" (To his credit, the ushers had said the concert would be 70 minutes long without intermission. In reality it lasted two and a half hours.)

Ensemble HD is an indisputably incredible group of musicians. That could've been proven even with a shorter program.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 15, 2016.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)