

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Schubert Journeys” at Reinberger Chamber Hall (July 1)

by Daniel Hathaway



Expanding its “Tales & Legends” theme in the direction of expeditions, ChamberFest Cleveland presented “Schubert Journeys” on Friday, July 1 in Reinberger Chamber Hall at Severance. In this case, the composer’s journeys were either brief and dramatic (in the *Quartettsatz in c*) or agreeably rambling — like a stroll in the

countryside with no destination and no timetable (in the *Octet*). In between, Kurt Rohde’s ... *maestoso* ... *mysterioso* ... sent two musicians off into uncharted territory with a curious set of tools.

Violinists Noah Bendix-Balgley and Itamar Zorman, violist Michael Klotz, and cellist Julie Albers set us off with Schubert’s *Quartettsatz* of 1820, the first movement of an abandoned string quartet. The rustling *tremolando* figure that gets passed from the first violin to the rest of the ensemble soon gives way to a wonderful lyrical theme that only Schubert could have written. Some iffy intonation at the outset took care of itself when that section was repeated, and thanks to the composer’s decision to reverse the order of the lyrical and dramatic material for the recapitulation, the brief movement ended as grippingly as it began. This is a tricky piece to pull off at the beginning of a program, but the quartet skillfully wove their material into an eventful narrative.

Kurt Rohde’s ... *maestoso* ... *misterioso* ... “for Amplified Violin, Amplified Viola and Assorted Items” called for violinist Diana Cohen and violist Yura Lee to take up harmonicas, Chinese paper accordions and gongs — and to vocalize. The piece is based on the technique of looping (in this case, recording live music and playing it back in various configurations while the musicians changed instruments or went on to new

material), a process the composer controlled from a laptop and mixer in front of the stage.

After a false start due to an uncooperative loudspeaker, Cohen and Lee plunged wholeheartedly into an interactive exercise the composer describes as “a means to allow the original string music to ‘push outward’ beyond its original purpose towards an unknown, more mysterious place.”



The result was an ever-changing series of beguiling sonorities which tickled the ear. The process became a bit repetitive, but happily, Rohde’s material is cleverly constructed.

Transformed by electronic reverberation and echoes, it was worth hearing again. Cohen and Lee handled Rohde’s complexities of rhythm and the challenges of swapping out instruments — not to mention singing while playing — with consummate skill.



Schubert's great *Octet* closed the program, with cellist Timotheos Petrin, bassist Nathan Farrington, clarinetist Franklin Cohen, bassoonist Fernando Traba, and hornist Benjamin Jaber joining Lee, Bendix-Balgley, and Klotz for this hour-long grand finale.

Written in an era when imitation was the sincerest of flattery and not the subject for lawsuits, the *Octet* was ordered up by the amateur clarinetist Count Ferdinand von Troyer and patterned on Beethoven's *Septet* with an added violin. Schubert might just as well have designed it to showcase the artistry of Franklin Cohen, who was first among equals in Friday's performance.



Highlights included the highly-inflected, quasi-tragic episodes that introduce the first and last movements (though Schubert can only sustain that mood for a while before becoming cheerfully lyrical again); the many fine solos during the theme and variations; and the stunning virtuosity the ensemble displayed in the race to the end of the last movement.

The musicians filled Reinberger with robust sonorities, constructed over the unfailingly solid foundation laid down by Nathan Farrington. The only element that might have been more effective was the physical setup. Locating the three winds in the middle of the ensemble rather than stage left of the strings might have produced a rounder blend, especially as heard from the right side of the house.

Aside from that, this performance was everything you could ask for in a Schubert journey: going away to see and hear interesting things and have excellent adventures, then returning safely home on the same day you left.

Photos by Gary Adams

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 5, 2016.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)