

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra at Plymouth Church (May 13)

by Jane Berkner



BlueWater Chamber Orchestra is a jewel in the local arts scene's crown. It's always a treat to hear these highly talented regional musicians, and their concert under the direction of guest conductor Thomas Hong at Plymouth Church on May 13 was no exception. Titled "Flying High," the program included two works with bird themes.

The concert began with Haydn's *Symphony No. 83*, nicknamed "The Hen." The Orchestra captured the tongue-in-cheek playfulness of the first movement, although there was a general heaviness to the playing, particularly in the top-heavy string section. This also dampened the gracefulness of the second movement, causing it to be more plodding and tedious than desired. However, the pairing of flute

and first violins in the Minuet was sweet and well-balanced, and the final movement was played with lots of energy and drive. Kudos to the wind section for some terrific playing in the Finale.

Hong told the audience that the piece's moniker, not given by Haydn, was derived from the pecking, hen-like nature of some of its parts. Hong mused whether hearing the music made anyone "want to eat seeds."

The concert marked BlueWater's first performance with a guest conductor since the passing of Founder, Artistic Director, and Conductor Carlton Woods earlier this year. Woods' vision for the Orchestra involved the musicians in running it. He included them on its board and gave them a voice in artistic and operational decisions.

Before playing the Mozart Clarinet Concerto, soloist Amitai Vardi dedicated his performance to Woods, welling up with emotion as he gave his touching tribute. "Even

though he is not with us, his vision still is.”

Playing the Mozart, Vardi managed to create a dialogue within a single line. With clearly delineated phrasing and abundant control, he jumped across wide intervals to form a wonderfully engaging conversation. Playing with a dark, silken tone, he brought a roundness to his articulations — there were no sharp edges.

In his gentle, personal interpretation of the concerto, the Orchestra became lighter and more cohesive in its role as collaborator. With seamless elegance, Vardi brought his colleagues to a whisper in the recapitulation of the alluring second movement. A rather cautious tempo made the third movement less joyous than it might have been.

In Ottorino Respighi’s *Gli Uccelli* (“The Birds”), Hong launched into a bright and vivid performance from the downbeat of the Prelude, accentuating the varied and multiple layers of color within the work.

Oboist Martin Neubert played a beautiful solo, and the strings created a transcendent and heavenly color in the second movement, “The Dove.” In “The Hen,” multiple solo instruments expertly passed around the pecky solo line. Special distinction goes to trumpeter Neil Mueller, who played strongly but with a fantastic sense of balance throughout the work. BlueWater played “The Birds” with sparkling precision and tremendous conviction, ending the concert with a flight to sublime heights.

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