

ChamberFest Cleveland Concert 6: “Forging New Paths” at Mixon (June 23)

by Nicholas Stevens



“Forging New Paths,” the title of ChamberFest Cleveland’s sixth concert this season, refers to a time when critics feared that classical music was dying. In an article titled “New Paths,” Robert Schumann predicted that his young colleague Brahms would become German art music’s savior. The unstated premise was that it needed one.

Subsequent generations have had the same anxieties, but new figures have always emerged to light the way. Each of the composers represented on ChamberFest’s program, Brahms included, faced pushback in blazing their trails. Hats off (as Schumann would have said) to the twelve eminently worthy advocates who brought these composers’ works to the Cleveland Institute of Music’s Mixon Hall on Saturday evening, June 23.

The concert opened with a sensuous rendition of the first movement from Handel’s *Trio Sonata* in c minor. Gone are the days when modern-instrument renditions of Baroque music tended toward clocklike churning. Violinist Amy Schwartz Moretti and flutist Lorna McGhee gave the overlapping lines of this Andante an elusive, elastic organicism. Cellist Clive Greensmith and harpsichordist Roman Rabinovich laid out a flexible pad of harmonic support, allowing time to expand and contract along with the phrases of the melody instruments.

In the first Allegro, McGhee's fierceness competed with Schwartz Moretti's bouncy articulations. The second Andante was as lush as the garden behind the stage's glass back wall, and the second Allegro offered elements of surprise and moment-to-moment rhythmic nuance. Greensmith played beautifully, but with appropriate restraint.



Ligeti's *Trio* for violin, horn, and piano, a program highlight, benefited from hornist William Caballero's warmth of tone and flexibility. Too bold for traditionalists of its day but also too expressive for progressives, it afforded violinist Diana Cohen an opportunity to cultivate both rich and icy tones. Pianist Zoltán Fejérvávi created star-like points of radiance with his right hand. The overall impression was of a cosmic logic underlying mysterious utterances.

The second movement, a lively dance, positively grooved — Fejérvávi sounded like two virtuosos in one, and Cohen and Caballero traded rapid-fire passages. The third movement found the violinist tackling difficult material with athletic fervor, and Caballero playing bell-up, albeit with tasteful tone. The finale, one of Ligeti's many lament-style movements of the 1980s, rounds out the piece's tour through states of movement and human emotion with a striking evocation of the struggle to process loss. When Cohen's extreme high notes rose above Caballero's low drones, closure felt distant.

The concert concluded with Rabinovich's chamber arrangement of Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*. While the music sounded like Brahms throughout, the thoroughly modern deployments of various instruments, such as Caballero's horn, gives this new transcription an appealing freshness. The wind section sound, audible

right away in the presentation of the theme, was vital in the hands of McGhee, Caballero, clarinetist Franklin Cohen, and bassoonist John Clouser.



Violist Tanner Menees stood out in a number of early variations. Greensmith consistently provided solid grounding for the group, along with Nathan Farrington, who makes virtuosic playing on the double bass look easy and sound lovely. Schwartz Moretti and Diana Cohen played an interlocking pizzicato passage as though they were one violinist, and later led the string section in ladling out a rich, chocolatey helping of chromaticism.

Some of the variations in the piece's second half remind us that not all of Brahms's ideas stand up to the test of time. However, as a demonstration of the composer's and their own ranges, the performance by these nine players wrapped up the concert in grand fashion.

Photos by Gary Adams.

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