

BlueWater Chamber Orchestra with Chang & Neubert (Nov. 10)

by Nicholas Stevens



That time of year has come: lawns turn white with snow as day arrives late, puddles freeze over when night comes early, and Northeast Ohioans glance outside with the knowledge that this is only the beginning. In this season, when the world outside seems to reject us with what feels like personal hostility, it takes real incentives to lure listeners to concert halls. Fortunately, the area offers many such tempting opportunities, and last weekend, a program by BlueWater Chamber Orchestra made the trip outside well worth it.

Guest conductor Tiffany Chang led the ensemble through two canonic mainstays and a relative rarity on Saturday, November 10 at Plymouth Church. Chang, currently teaching at Oberlin Conservatory, encountered the music of Lukas Foss when she moved to Boston, where she still holds a number of positions. (Foss taught at Boston University for many years.) As it happens, that under-programmed composer wrote a compact yet wide-ranging concerto for oboe, which BlueWater principal Martin Neubert (*pictured above*) took on as soloist Saturday evening.

Expressive and detail-oriented, Chang distinguished herself and helped reveal the Orchestra's capabilities in the first minutes of Beethoven's Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*. An instrumental introduction to the composer's lone ballet score, it opens with imposing chords and oozes into slow melodies, which the players shaped with care. For the first of many times that evening, clarinetists Candice Kiser and Gunnar Owen Hirthe played with the sort of capacious tone that only their instrument can achieve.

The winds thinned their ranks to a sextet for Foss's *Oboe Concerto*, an exercise in mid-century neoclassical restraint throughout. The first movement bursts into being with a striking group chord and oboe solo, in which Neubert showed off his unfailing high

range. Past that point, the movement chugged along at moderate tempo, well executed but emotionally blank — by the composer’s design. The second movement supplies more varied material. Neubert played cascading lines above the orchestra’s static chords, leaning into Foss’s carefully chosen “wrong” notes. In the final movement, Chang and the Orchestra remained dynamic as oboe solos cut into their textures.



The title of the program, “Opulent Oboe and Scintillating Symphony,” fit because Foss demands so much of the oboist that it takes a player of rich talents to handle it as ably as Neubert did — and because Haydn’s “Drumroll” Symphony, No. 103, fluoresces like so much of the composer’s later music. Chang savored Haydn’s moments of surprise and suspense in the first movement, drummed into being by timpanist Andrew Nowak. In the slow movement, unusually lavish by the

standards of symphonies at the time, concertmaster Emily Cornelius made the extensive violin solo her own. Playing with elasticity and energy, she laid into each line, simple or virtuosic, with equal confidence and élan. Principal horn Ken Wadenpfohl showed flexibility in exposed moments of the third movement, and a sustained build throughout the finale culminated in a suitably strong cadence.

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