

Heights Arts Close Encounters features women composers (Nov. 11)

by Nicholas Stevens



The cloud-enshrouded last weeks of the year have come fast, and soon, list-making journalists will issue postmortems and praises for 2018 — summaries and “best of” lists by the dozen. What a perfect time, then, for five Northeast Ohio string players to make a strong case for Concert of the Year, under the

auspices of Heights Arts’ Close Encounters Chamber Music series.

That performance on November 11 took place in a home in Cleveland Heights’ Herrick Mews, a lane lined with carriage houses once owned by the United States’ Ambassador to France during World War I, Myron T. Herrick. Listeners congregated there one hundred years to the day after the armistice that ended Herrick’s greatest trial, a coincidence lost neither on the home’s owner nor, thanks to her comments of welcome, the audience.

Featuring violinists Mari Sato and Katherine Bormann, violist Kirsten Docter, and cellist Amir Eldan, Marianne Pfau’s arrangement of Hildegard’s *O virtus sapientiae* made for an almost literally entrancing opener. The medieval chant melody moved around the quartet as single players or subgroups laid down drones. The arrangement highlighted the tension and release built into music centuries older than modern harmony, each acrid clash resolving into accord as the drones grew to cavernous dimensions. Moderating or embracing vibrato from moment to moment, each player phrased with extraordinary sensitivity.

As the first bars of Caroline Shaw's *Entr'acte {a minuet and trio}* rang out, it became clear how ideal the space was for this sort of performance, forgiving yet crystal-clear in its wood-paneled vastness. Isabel Trautwein, the Close Encounters artistic director and, here, second violin to Bormann's first, characterized Shaw's quartet as "a fun piece." That it is, but it can yield chuckles or gasps depending on the moment. Always approaching the beauty of Baroque or Classical music only to dissolve into pitch bends or whispery bow noise, it balances levity and profundity as well as Haydn did — Shaw's stated inspiration in writing the piece. The concluding all-pizzicato cello solo found Eldan playing with surreally warm, vibrant tone.

Roll over, Paganini: Joan Tower's *String Force* for violin resets the bar for virtuosity. Also embodying that quality was Mari Sato, who played with glassy high tones that could melt into pure taffy. Critics of modernist music sometimes complain that it's impossible to know when a player hits a wrong note, but Sato handled every screech, slide, and torrent with such assurance that it was clear she had nailed each gesture.

The concert concluded with Fanny Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's lone *String Quartet*. Several qualities of the first movement anticipate Mahler, from its then-unusual adagio tempo to its thematic variety, rich counterpoint, and surges of passion. The quartet pulled off an emotional 180-degree turn to deliver a *tour de force* of a scherzo, with Docter and Eldan shredding through runs of notes at breakneck speed. Trautwein, on the first violin part, offered lovely high tunes in the "Romance." The movement also contains a late passage of such intensity that the quartet needed to pour themselves into the music to achieve a muscular enough collective sound. An archetypal final fireworks display, the fourth movement invited toe-tapping as perpetual-motion lines rushed by.

The title of the concert, "We Too: 1,000 Years of Music by Women," conveys nothing about the uniformly first-rate quality of these pieces, nor much about the first-rate musicians who rendered them with such force and precision. However, it reveals one more reason why the concert was such an exceptional occasion. In the past year, dozens of stories have detailed the ways, annoying or annihilating, in which institutions have blocked the participation and silenced the voices of women. Here was an event to once again demonstrate that, even under explicit prohibition, women have reached and continue to reach the loftiest heights in the arts. It is telling that this concert, presented in semi-private by an organization not exclusively committed to classical music, met and exceeded the standards of more prominent musical arts associations. Listeners, watch these players; they know perfectly well what they're doing.

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