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Heights Chamber Orchestra at St. Paul's, Cleveland Hts. (Feb. 24)

by Nicholas Stevens



Concert promoters often confront a dilemma: advertisement demands a level of concision that can reduce a rich, varied program to a name or two and some titles. Undeclared riches might await behind a program labeled, say, "Satie's *Parade*." Wise, then, for the Heights Chamber Orchestra to avoid choosing a descriptive tagline for their most recent concert. So many individual aspects of the performance charmed that to single out one would be to minimize its many surprising delights.

St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights made an ideal venue for this performance on Sunday

afternoon, February 24. With its narrow stretch of vaulted ceiling, leading to a broad dais where the instrumentalists perched, the space allowed the Orchestra to cut loose without overwhelming the audience and still enliven the shared air in soft passages.

Guest conductor Dean Buck took charge from the first, cueing and conveying pulse with absolute assurance and decisive hand and forearm motions. Verdi's *Overture to La Forza del Destino* commenced with aggressive, angular gestures that yielded to melting, emotive slower sections. The trombones and tuba served as a solid foundation for a unified brass sound in this impressive opener, before taking a break for the middle portion of the program.

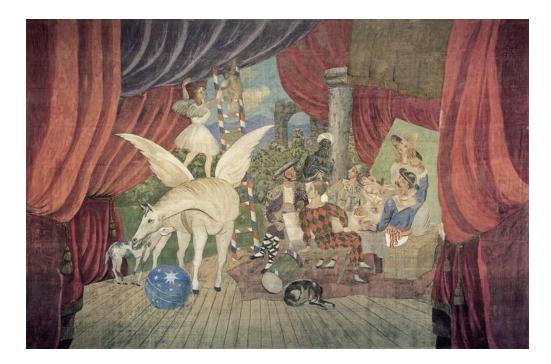
The temporarily smaller Orchestra's rendition of Mozart's *Exsultate, Jubilate* placed soprano Angela Mortellaro, who sang with strength, presence, and consistent vibrato, in the spotlight. Unfortunately, that high ceiling, so suitable for the orchestral sound, swallowed some of her coloratura in the first movement. Both helped and hindered by this acoustic quirk at the cadenza, her voice became a shimmering, almost disembodied sound.



Written in 1993 and scored for a rare solo instrument, Stephen Caudel's *Edel Rhapsody* appears on programs only infrequently. Yet in the hands of principal horn Tren Cheshier, the Wagner Horn — a variant of the French horn re-wrapped in the shape of a tiny tuba and named for the composer who commissioned its creation — sang like a world-famous balladeer. References to composers from Holst and Vaughan Williams to Grainger, Mendelssohn, and Mahler, floated by as the soloist spun out melodies in brief contrasting sections. A deftly handled shift in key near the end concluded the performance with a glimpse of the beautiful and unexpected.

Phillipa Brown Yin's program notes provided vital assistance during the course of Satie's *Parade*,

originally a ballet score, but here presented as a purely musical circus act. Percussionists Greg Spangler, Robert Weppler, and John Sharp quickly emerged as the engine of Satie's churning modernist machine, wielding whips and whistles.



Without those notes, one could hardly appreciate the import of such attention-grabbing moments as the typewriter solo, all of which corresponded to precise visual cues in the original multimedia event. Hallucinatory to begin with, and made more surreal by the substitution of a church for the onstage circus tent of the original, *Parade* made for a

strange closer. Yet Heights Chamber Orchestra, led firmly and fearlessly as ever by Buck, demonstrated the value of taking such substantial risks.

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