

CMA: violinist Carolin Widmann at Transformer Station (Mar 29)

by Daniel Hathaway



Concerts at Transformer Station always come with surprises, and on Thursday evening, March 29, there were at least two from the get-go. The audience found themselves seated around one of Mexican artist Raúl de Nieves' enigmatic beadwork and fabric installations. And in a way, the extraordinary concert by German violinist Carolin Widmann was already in progress when ticket holders arrived.

As we walked in, somewhere Widmann was warming up on the Chaconne from Bach's d-minor Partita, its sounds ricocheting around the concrete walls of the former electric supply station. After Cleveland Museum of Art performing arts director Tom Welch welcomed the audience — introducing the “special guests” in the room and requesting us not to disturb the stones at their feet — off in the distance Widmann began playing an *Introitus* by the Medieval abbess and composer Hildegard von Bingen, appropriately using that music to make a meditative procession into the gallery.

Leapfrogging over centuries of music, Widmann programmed recent works by George Benjamin, Hans Abrahamsen, and her brother Jörg Widmann, before closing out her hour-long performance with the Bach.

Benjamin's *3 Miniatures* set the tone for a playlist largely devoted to extended violin techniques. The first, a Lullaby, was incongruously devoted to dissonant double stops and whistling harmonics. Vigorous rhythmic strokes separated by soft, single notes dominated the second, while the third featured pizzicati, later alternating with bowed passages.

The violinist noted that Abrahamsen's *Capriccio Bagateller* was the last work the composer wrote in 1990 before beginning a twelve-year, self-imposed silence. Surging tremolos, buzzy long tones separated by left-hand pizzicati, and a high-pitched finale distinguished the four-minute piece, which made a fine impression in the lively acoustic of the Station's smaller gallery.



Perhaps there should be a new category (*musica panoramica?*) for modern solo works that are so busy that the performer is obliged to lay out the score over multiple music stands. Flutist Carlton Vickers, in a memorable concert at Heights Arts in 2016, needed ten stands to play Brian Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule*. Widmann used only eight for her brother's *3 Etudes*, but in each case the player's progress from left to right both added a kinetic quality to the performance and let you know how much of the piece was still to come.

Jörg Widmann wrote that his *Etudes* follow in the tradition of Paganini, Chopin, Liszt, and Ligeti in that each poses a single technical challenge. No. 1 invites an exploration of the violin's resonance potential, No. 2 moves from a three-part chorale to "spirited, unbridled virtuosity," and No. 3 puts the player's left hand through a workout.

Carolin Widmann noted that No. 2 would add a surprise, and after masterfully negotiating the rocking harmonies and woozy unisons of the first Etude, she vocalized in the second, filling in between violin lines with her voice. The perpetual motion third Etude features swooping gestures between the high and low ends of the instrument, and ends in a denouement of pizzicati.

Taking only a brief moment to note that the great Chaconne of the d-minor Partita may have been Bach's homage to his first wife, Widmann also said that, to her, it represents the great circle of life, and pulses with a human heartbeat.

Her strong performance of the whole work, but especially the Chaconne, was so riveting in its intensity that the ear began to give out toward the end for lack of emotional and dynamic respite. As Widmann put down her bow and acknowledged a powerful ovation, I wrote "Exhausting!" in my program. A moment later, my neighbor turned to her friend and said, "I'm completely worn out!"

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 15, 2019.

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