

Three ENCORE concerts (June 28 & 30, July 5)

by David Kulma



The theme of ENCORE Chamber Music's fourth season is "La Bohème: Art and Freedom," mixing meanings of Bohemianism. It has brought together the 19th-century artistic movement that sought to break down conventions (think the characters from Puccini's opera) with composers from Bohemia, of which Dvořák is the most famous. I attended three concerts where the overarching theme was successfully bent to include music from Mozart to living American composers.

Gilmour Academy's Tudor House brought to life a 19th-century chamber setting. The ample drawing room had an intimate acoustic even when filled with young people. Musical nuances were clearly heard over oscillating fans, even at the back of the room. (Without air conditioning in a Northeast

Ohio summer, the weather became part of each concert. I experienced muggy heat with the aural accompaniment of downpours, a delightful mild afternoon, and a hot oppressive evening.)

The performers, mainly ENCORE's expert faculty but also including young artists, were uniformly excellent and engaging. The high level of playing on display was remarkable, and artistic director Jinjoo Cho mixed and matched musicians so that most pieces had different personnel. Each work was presented with great care, precision, and gusto.

Friday, June 28 "Round Round Rondo"

Organized around the rondo finale form with its returning refrain, this concert was best exemplified by the last movement of the final work on the program: Brahms' *Piano Quartet in g*, Op. 25. Violinist Roman Fraser, violist Dimitri Murrath, cellist Tanya Ell,

and pianist Hyunsoo Kim played the work with the forward energy of a sports car on a highway. Nothing was too fast for their skills. Though some of us prefer to luxuriate in Brahms' caramel textures rather than zoom along, the "Rondo alla Zingarese" was an exciting feat of engineering.

Another g-minor work with its own rondo finale was Mozart's *String Quintet*, K. 516, all ease and eloquence in the hands of violinists Jinjoo Cho and Sibbi Bernhardsson, violists Dimitri Murrath and Yu Jin, and cellist Max Geissler. The group spun out the music with a smooth clarity, even in the bouncy sections. Mozart is at his best in the third-movement Adagio, where he juxtaposes dark and light with each return gaining in meaning.

Sandwiched between these two well-known works was Kodály's *String Trio*, Op. 12. Violinists Brendan Shea and Joseph Kromholz and violist Julia Clancy played this evocative three-movement work with flair and elan. The trio brought bright spirit to the tuneful folkish melodies and powerfully drove through the vigorous sections. The highlight was the second movement's dark calm. Their gorgeous playing included insect-like sounds.

Sunday, June 30 "Cavalier Cleveland"

Supported by the Bascom Little Fund, this concert featured works by composers with various Cleveland connections.

Composer/violinist Michi Wiancko studied at CIM, and her *Blue Bourrée* (2014), played by violinists Cho and Fraser, violist Eric Wong, and cellists Geissler and Denise Ro, was a delightfully raucous quintet that mixed a stately Baroque opening line with a magnetic and funky rhythmic sensibility.

Cleveland native Dan Visconti's *Black Bend* (2003) for string quartet engagingly combines a down-home country blues element with the weirdness of slippery extended techniques. Cho, Fraser, Wong, and Geissler gave this exciting — verging on bonkers — quartet a hair-raising reading, especially during the elaborate solos once the twelve-bar blues set in.

Hyunsoo Kim arranged three of longtime Clevelander H. Leslie Adams's six *Nightsongs*, on texts by African American poets, to make a suite for piano and string quartet. This beautiful instrumental version was elegantly played by Cho, Fraser, Wong, Geissler, and Kim. The third movement, "Creole Girl," with its bouncing syncopation, was the most memorable.

Composer/cellist Paul Wiancko gets his Cleveland connection through his sister Michi. His string quartet *LIFT* (2016) is almost five different pieces rolled into one. Cho, Fraser, Wong, and Geissler played with impressive fire in this frenetic and ever-changing work. Mixing minimalist textures with more imposing modernist ones, Wiancko constantly shifts to new ideas across this nearly half-hour span split into three movements. Although *LIFT* contains a good deal of amazing music, it feels more like someone searching for the next hit of excitement rather than a cohesive whole.

The concert ended with the most tangential but most “Bohemian” Cleveland connection, Ernő Dohnányi’s *Piano Quintet*, Op. 1. That early 20th-century Hungarian composer is better known in Cleveland as grandfather to Cleveland Orchestra music director laureate Christoph von Dohnányi. This lengthy, four-movement work shows the young composer with a firm control of the German Romantic idiom, sounding like a young Richard Strauss mixed with Schumann. It was brought to life with grace and passion by violinists Bernhardsson and Rachel Sandman, violist Jin, cellist Ell, and pianist Kim.

Friday, July 5 “Letters from Vienna”

The final concert I attended focused on Vienna, the longtime pillar of classical music in Europe.

Schubert’s *Rondo in A*, D. 438, for violin and string quartet, showed off Jinjoo Cho’s many musical skills. Accompanied by violinist Minhye Choi and three ENCORE Young Artists — violinist Kiarra Saito-Beckman, violist Bethlehem Hadgu, and cellist William Cayanan — Cho engagingly bounced through this charming, yet dramatic work, showing off her lively technique and magnificent intonation. Her colleagues ably held down the fort as she took off into Schubert’s virtuosic flights of fancy with keen precision.

The only extant piece of chamber music by Gustav Mahler is the first movement of his *Piano Quartet in a*. Brooding over a plangent three-note motive, this darkly Brahmsian work in sonata form was expertly presented by violinist Jinjoo Cho, violist Dimitri Murrath, cellist Max Geissler, and pianist Kwan Yi. This Austro-Bohemian composer who rose to the highest echelons of Viennese musical life easily connected this concert with ENCORE’s seasonal theme.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold is best known in this country as the most important film composer of Hollywood’s golden age, but before fleeing Europe for Los Angeles, he was Vienna’s composer *Wunderkind*. Written in his mid-20s, his *Piano Quintet*, Op. 15 is a compositional tour de force firmly in the German tonal tradition. Yet Korngold manages to show his ecumenical taste and explore most of the burgeoning styles of

1920s Europe in this sprawling, half-hour long, three-movement work. Violinists Bernhardsson and Sandman, violist Wong, cellist Geissler, and pianist Yi mined the passion and pathos in this overheated music. Particularly wonderful was the intoxicating second movement Adagio, which showed the overlap between the Viennese classical tradition and the Hollywood soundstage.

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