

## ChamberFest Cleveland: An Enchanting Celebration (July 2)

by Peter Feher



If you missed the tail end of ChamberFest Cleveland's season, don't be too worried. The highlights from each summer of brilliant, collaborative performances have a way of sticking around — online on the Festival's YouTube channel and, more recently, on the radio with WCLV. Certainly this year's finale, on July 2 at the Maltz Performing Arts Center, was full of such memorable musical moments.

The program, titled “An Enchanting Celebration,” made good on its promise of a special event. ChamberFest put two large ensembles on stage for a pair of works brimming with instrumental and stylistic variety.

Johannes Brahms thought of chamber music as the proving ground for symphonic composing — if he could write well for a handful of players, then he could move on to full orchestra — and no piece better demonstrates this belief than his *Serenade No. 1 in D*. Surviving today in the composer's orchestral adaptation, the work premiered as a nonet. ChamberFest presented a reconstruction of this original, done in 2007 by Alan Boustead, allowing each of the nine essential voices to shine through.

A lively horn call (here played by Mark Almond) opens the first movement and is soon taken up with gusto by other instruments — clarinet (Franklin Cohen), flute (Lorna McGhee), violin (Diana Cohen), and eventually the entire ensemble. Almond's glorious sound came to the fore throughout, from the passion of the central Adagio to the rustic stomp of the fifth-movement Scherzo.

Occasionally, this group of strong, soloistic musicians disagreed when it came to ensemble moments, such as passages in unison or octaves that required a more malleable approach. But personalities were perfectly matched for the concluding Rondo, which had everyone playing out for a set of variations and diverting episodes.

Versatility was a nonnegotiable feature of Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs*, starting with the vocal demands. Soprano Lucy Fitz Gibbon sang in a mix of languages across the work's eleven movements, sounding her most operatic on the French and Italian selections but favoring a simpler delivery for two Appalachian tunes, "Black is the colour" and "I wonder as I wander." The setting of a Sicilian song, "A la femminisca," challenged Fitz Gibbon in her low register, but every high note and trill bloomed effortlessly.

Berio's modernist proclivities inform his arrangements but by no means overwhelm them. Unmeasured rhythms and dissonant intervals on the viola (Matthew Lipman) are meant to approximate fiddling, and steady accompaniment from the harp (Heidi Elise Bearcroft) underpins many movements. A pair of percussionists (Alexander Cohen and Zubin Hathi) add color more than anything, contributing to a compositional whole where every instrumental detail becomes something to look forward to.

Another fun contemporary piece, Jörg Widmann's *Fantasie for Solo Clarinet*, began the program. Extended techniques, allusions to other works, and a pastiche of genres and styles combine for this virtuoso showcase, all handled with confidence and even a little swagger by Nicole Martin, an undergraduate student of Franklin Cohen's at the Cleveland Institute of Music. It was an introduction that local audiences are sure to remember.

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