

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Timeless Explorations” (June 25)

by Daniel Hathaway



The first piece of business at ChamberFest Cleveland’s June 25 concert in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music was rearranging the order of the program. “Timeless Explorations” was to have begun with a new piece, but probably for practical reasons involving a prepared piano, Yevgeniy Sharlat’s *Dumka-22* and Beethoven’s *Piano Trio*, Op. 70, No. 2 traded places.

Violinist Diana Cohen, cellist Jonathan Swensen, and pianist Andrius Žlabys launched the sixth concert of ChamberFest’s tenth anniversary season with an effervescent performance of Beethoven’s least-performed trio. Bedecked with sparkling runs and ensemble flourishes and set in the *gemütlich* key of E-flat, the piece made an attractive opener and served as a lovely vehicle for the musicians to express their unassuming virtuosity.

Introducing himself after the Beethoven, Yevgeniy Sharlat admitted that he was killing time while the piano was being readied for his new work, but he did convey some interesting information in his engaging, self-effacing chat. He said that he intended to write a piece featuring Franklin, Diana, and Alexander Cohen and Diana’s husband, Roman Rabinovich, but that would mean scoring it for clarinet, violin, timpani, and piano — and timpani just didn’t fit into that chamber ensemble. Then in February, Russia invaded Ukraine, which changed the whole character of the project.

Sharlat decided to have Alexander Cohen perform using his normal percussion tools, but inside the piano. CCTV projected on an overhead screen showed what he was up

to — and that was reminiscent of watching a surgical procedure with the other musicians surrounding the operating table.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the piece, which didn't produce many sounds we hadn't heard before from rigged Steinways, is its title — *Dumka* — and the associations that calls up. People familiar with Dvořák's chamber music will recognize another form of the word, "Dumky," but how many of us know that it originally comes from the Ukrainian word for a melancholy epic ballad?

It would have been interesting to repeat this new work on the other side of intermission after letting it settle in for a little while. Especially if there's something interesting to watch — like Alexander Cohen's mallet work inside the piano case — it can be difficult to concentrate on the music the first time around.

Instead, the evening ended with a spirited performance of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Clarinet Quintet* played by Franklin Cohen, violinists Geneva Lewis and Alexi Kenney, violist Dimitri Murrath, and cellist Jonathan Swensen, who exuberantly tapped into its inner character. Written in 1895 when the composer was only 19, and refreshingly non-Teutonic for a student of Charles Villiers Stanford, the quintet's cheerful personality and the vitality of its rhythms suggest that the composer is not-so-secretly channeling Dvořák.

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