

## Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Blossom (Aug. 27)

by Peter Feher



Orpheus Chamber Orchestra has an advantage when it comes to commanding a crowd. The ensemble of scarcely more than a dozen string players performed for a packed Blossom Music Center on August 27 and seemed entirely at home in the huge venue. Saturday's concert brought the summer classical season here to a close in understated yet completely gripping fashion.

And the Orpheus effect has everything to do with who's *not* onstage. The New York City-based group has rehearsed and performed without a conductor since its founding in 1972, and this means its members share the musical authority that typically rests with one person. Multiplied by a dozen or so, the interpretation of a piece suddenly emanates from every player, from the concertmaster to the double bass, resonating with a kind of collective power.

Not that this practice is without precedent — quite the opposite, in fact. The major work on the orchestra's program Saturday, Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, often gets the collaborative, small-ensemble treatment, particularly from early music groups, where conductors naturally pitch in as instrumentalists, too.

Orpheus might show some of the general influence of the historical-performance movement — adopting certain Baroque stylings like punchy accents on the important beats in a measure — but this is no period orchestra. The group sustained a beautiful, vibrato-filled sound throughout Vivaldi's concerto cycle. And even more in character, the supporting players asserted themselves with all the personality of modern soloists, starting with the staggered series of bird calls that open the first concerto, "Spring."

On the solo violin part, Vadim Gluzman proved the perfect guest collaborator. He kept up the tempo in the score's more furious sections and played every virtuoso passage exactly in time — smart decisions to ease the potential coordination challenges of a conductor-less ensemble. He also knew just where to put a personal touch, from lyrical

playing that revealed a sensitive side to tasteful ornaments that added to the Adagio in “Winter.”

Still, in the Orpheus spirit, it was fitting that Gluzman’s encore — the Largo ma non tanto from J.S. Bach’s *Concerto for Two Violins* — featured the entire ensemble.

The orchestra stayed in a similar Baroque-meets-modern mindset for the first half of the program. The hybrid approach began with Francesco Geminiani’s *La Folia Variations*, in an arrangement by Michi Wiancko that brings contemporary fun to an 18th-century piece.

Orpheus adopted a period sound to start — minimal, reserved, and sans vibrato. But as the variations took off, the technique grew wilder, ranging from snap pizzicatos to passages scored like movie music, to auxiliary percussion taken up by members of the ensemble (woodblock, tambourine, and even foot-stomping from the whole group).

Adolphus Hailstork’s *Sonata da Chiesa* gets its name from the Baroque distinction between church music (“da chiesa”) and chamber music (“da camera”). The composer’s modern take on the form features plenty of hushed, reverential string writing, sometimes contained in a single solo line and sometimes shared by the full orchestra. Either way, a small handful of musicians could capture your attention.

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