

CityMusic Cleveland: “Festive Sounds” (Dec. 9)

by Stephanie Manning



“Colors,” the theme for CityMusic Cleveland’s current season, seemed a particularly apt descriptor for their concert on December 9. While Lakewood Congregational Church was decorated in holiday greenery, the musicians inside forewent traditional black attire for shades of festive red. But those two colors weren’t the only ones in play. Led by principal guest conductor Stefan Willich, the Chamber Orchestra provided all kinds of vivid imagery in the second program of their 19th season.

With its policy of free admission, CityMusic is a prime example of how the price of the ticket doesn’t always correlate to the quality of the performance. The centerpiece of the program, Mozart’s *Symphony No. 4 in g*, proved the group particularly apt in the style of the Classical composer. Aided by clean and precise phrasing, the group gave off the rich sound of a larger ensemble. Though the second movement lagged a bit, the third movement was much more lively and nicely bookended by the first and fourth. The acoustics in the venue are resonant, though perhaps a little overly so — some eager bowing from the basses noticeably rumbled the balcony seats. The placement of the wind section — raised above the strings towards the back of the church’s chancel platform — helped with both sightlines and projection.

The concert opened with more Mozart, namely two selections from *The Marriage of Figaro*. The brisk overture smoothly led into the aria “Giunse alfin il momento ... Deh vieni,” with guest soloist Chabrelle Williams. Though the tempo occasionally felt slow, the soprano’s voice was well-suited to the genre. With no hint of strain and her high notes shimmering and sweet, her voice proved delicate and strong, like spider silk.

Williams returned to the stage after intermission for two more operatic selections. In Puccini's "O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*, her wide dynamic range helped her hold her own against the lush orchestration, which played to the ensemble's strengths. Well-placed hand gestures in Verdi's "Caro Nome" from *Rigoletto* added to her expressiveness, and her moment of sung laughter was in perfect unison with the flute. Her stunningly effortless cadenza earned her a standing ovation.



The audience was equally appreciative of the evening's other guest soloist, Cleveland Orchestra second trumpet Jack Sutte. Johann Baptist Georg Neruda's *Trumpet Concerto in E-flat* may have been the least famous work on the program, but stylistically it remained a fitting choice. The piece may not be familiar to those who aren't trumpet players, but its Baroque conventions certainly are. Above the groundwork of strings and harpsichord, Sutte's clear tone and consistently centered pitch made the work engaging and easy to follow.

Although Neruda's work has no associations with this time of year, it was nevertheless the most emblematic of the program's title, "Festive Sounds." After all, the trumpet is the perfect match for the holiday season.

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