

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Karenin’s Smile” (June 16)

by Kevin McLaughlin



After the seriousness and communal pall brought on by the COVID pandemic, this year’s ChamberFest is asserting “Lightness of Being” as a theme, inspired by Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In the second concert of the Festival, titled “Karenin’s Smile,” works by Mozart, Janáček, and Saint-Saëns were appropriately buoyant and cheerful, thrilling those gathered at Cleveland’s St. Wendelin Church on June 16.

Mozart wrote two of his six so-called “viola quintets” in 1787 in close succession — one in C major, one in G minor. The C major, with its more amiable and optimistic disposition, was a fitting choice on Friday evening.

Cellist Jonathan Swensen opened with a puckish rising arpeggiated triad, which first violinist David Bowlin answered with equally cheeky delight. The wide-ranging motive hinted at the movement’s dimensions (a good fifteen minutes long), and the violin answer set the bantering pattern. Bowlin made a fine leader, acquitting himself in both Allegro movements with mirthful virtuosity.

The order of the middle movements as printed in the program — Andante then Menuetto — was reversed by the players, a common choice. It’s a sedate minuet, so the difference wasn’t jarring. The quintet played up Mozart’s quirky crescendos that build to sudden quiet and the ominous chromaticism of the Trio that dissolves into folksy Ländler.

In the slow movement, violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt exuded Mozartian charm for a tender operatic duet with Bowlin. You could understand why the viola was the composer’s instrument of choice during chamber music gatherings in Vienna.

Before Janáček's *Concertino* for piano, two violins, viola, clarinet, French horn, and bassoon, pianist and Festival co-artistic director Roman Rabinovich read a brief observation in Kundera's novel characterizing the humane treatment of animals as one sign of inherent goodness ("lightness of being").

Janáček was not thinking in moralistic terms, but the *Concertino* does portray animals with Aesopian personality — often humorously — and by inference, particularly deserving of human compassion. (The fact that the composer withheld any programmatic implications until a year *after* its premiere in 1926 tickles me.)

The horn (Nelson Ricardo Yovera Perez), first lethargic then stentorian, tells us about the "grumpy hedgehog," while the E-flat clarinet, played gleefully by Benjamin Chen, is a "fidgety squirrel." All seven players come together as the owl and her shrieking nighttime colleagues engage in a vigorous debate. Finally, the piano, in a witty cadenza, closes the barnyard door. The work benefited from precise, virtuosic solo playing by Rabinovich.

Rabinovich and fellow co-artistic director Diana Cohen (violin), along with cellist Sterling Elliott, joined forces in the second half for a ravishing performance of Camille Saint-Saëns's *Piano Trio No. 2*.

In her remarks, Cohen introduced the work, written in 1892, as a counterbalance to Wagner hysteria at the time. It is certainly not Wagnerian. Filled with sparkling, pristine lines, it edges toward the French, but there is German sensibility too, especially in the first and last movements (even a surprise fugue), plus a Latin dance or two in the quirky 5/8 second movement — adding up to what exactly? Pure Saint-Saëns. Elliott, new to ChamberFest, was a revelation. His easy strokes haloed the ensemble in deep crimson hues.

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