

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Fidelity and Betrayal” (June 17)

by Mike Telin



From the beginning, ChamberFest Cleveland’s artistic directors have turned to creative themes for their programming inspiration. This season the Festival’s guiding light has taken a literary slant with *Lightness of Being* — after Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. But don’t feel like you need to have read the novel to enjoy the concerts — Donald Rosenberg’s brilliantly written program notes will tell you what you need to know.

On Saturday, June 17 in CIM’s Mixon Hall, the program “Fidelity and Betrayal” included works from the standard repertoire, a never-performed work by a well-known composer, a piece inspired by Cuban and South American dances, and music that had never been heard before — anytime, anywhere.

The concert opened with a standard in the piano four hands repertoire, Franz Schubert’s *Fantasie in f*. A work in four movements, played without pause, it begins with a hummable tune which gives way to a passionate largo and a frisky scherzo before revisiting the opening theme. While many players approach it as a “charming” piece of salon music, this performance by Amy Yang and Roman Rabinovich had a commanding presence that highlighted the composer’s Romantic side. The tempos were never rushed and every dramatic moment was savored.

The circuitous route that ChamberFest organizers followed to obtain permission to perform Jean Sibelius’s *Svartsjukans Nätter* (“Nights of Jealousy”) is itself fodder for a novel. As co-artistic director Diana Cohen told the audience, the work had never been

published, and their search eventually led them to electric bassist and composer Lauri Porra, Sibelius's great-grandson, who was able to grant them permission to perform it.

Svartsjukans Nätter, for piano trio, offstage soprano, and narrator, sets a poem by Johan Ludvig Runeberg in which we find the protagonist remembering a former lover, Minna, whom he encounters in a dream while walking in nature.

David Bowlin (violin), Sterling Elliot (cello), and Amy Yang (piano) gave a performance that was as gripping as the vivid poetry — one that embodied the angst that accompanies lost love. Soprano Ashlee Foreman's pure tone floated in the hall as she enticed her former lover to follow. Narrator Jonathan Swensen, reciting an English translation, outdid himself as he allowed the dream to unfold with a reserved romanticism. During the finale stanza he gave a humorous punch to the delivery of the final two words:

... I lay and sensed the swelling of her breast,
and drank the moisture from her cheeks
and fainted from the ecstasy — and woke.

While Franz Waxman's *Carmen Fantasie* skillfully presents the title character of Bizet's opera, the popular showpiece often gets a bad rap due to its frequent appearances in competitions for young violinists. Luckily that was not evident here. Jacques Forestier is a violinist with formidable technique. He also possesses a musical sense that captures your attention — and a burnished tone and excellent intonation certainly help. Amy Yang was the consummate collaborator throughout.

If anyone felt the first half of the program was perhaps a little staid, the second half raised the roof of Mixon, beginning with an exuberant performance of Paquito D'Rivera's *Three Pieces for Clarinet and Piano*. Here Yang was joined by clarinetist Franklin Cohen, who threw caution to the wind during the fiery "Contradanza" and "Vals Venezolano" — a Venezuelan waltz. The duo brought charm to the middle movement, "Habanera."

The audience got an added bonus with the addition of percussionist Jamey Haddad during the first and third movements. Not that the piece lacks any spice on its own, but Haddad is a master when it comes to adding pizzazz to any piece of music, and his astute contributions provided the perfect sparkle to the score.

Introducing clarinetist Ismail Lumanovski, Cohen said, "The guy's a walking genius." Those words rang true as Lumanovski joined Haddad and pianist Roman Rabinovich for a mesmerizing improvisation that began with a rhythmic pattern by Haddad on a frame drum. Again, Haddad's brilliance at seamlessly creating a musical platform on the spot paved the way for Lumanovski to join in. He wasted no time showing his ample

“classical” skills before moving onto a virtuosic display of Eastern European folk music — he’s a member of the New York Gypsy All-Stars and one of the founders of The Secret Trio.

Turning down the heat, Rabinovich added his improvisatory skills to music that recalled Schubert’s *Fantasie* before moving into a rock-and-roll groove. Here the trio pulled out all the stops. Did I say raise the roof?

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