

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Vortex” (June 25)

by Mike Telin



If you are familiar with William Cowper’s 1785 poem *The Task*, then you know the famous line “Variety is the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavor.” On Sunday, June 25 at Harkness Chapel, ChamberFest Cleveland presented a program that was steeped in musical variety and spices for the ear.

Written in 1977, Alfred Schnittke’s *Moz-Art (after the fragment K. 416d)* is based on the first violin part from Mozart’s unpublished pantomime, with dollops of the opening theme of his 40th Symphony stirred into the mix.

The quirky five-minute work for two violins asks the players to throw caution to the winds as they seemingly compete to see who can turn a classical line into something absurd faster than the other.

The performance by Itamar Zorman and Diana Cohen was bust-your-gut funny. Bowed notes turned into plucked ones, then scratchings, in tune became out of tune, and slow tempos became fast enough to break the sound barrier. Hilarity ensued when the players swapped out their instruments, Zorman grabbing a very tiny violin while Cohen opted for a viola. After reclaiming their rightful fiddles, the players mischievously walked away whistling.

Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 12 in A* provided the audience with the opportunity to bask in the composer’s unadulterated music. Accompanied by a string quintet (*senza* oboes, horns, and conductor), Orion Weiss brought charm and pristine articulation to every phrase in the opening Allegro. The middle Andante exuded charm and the final Rondeau-Allegretto was full of effortless pizzazz. Throughout, Weiss, along with Itamar Zorman and James Thompson (violins), Samuel Rosenthal (viola), Nicholas Canellakis (cello), and Nathan Farrington (bass), combined to make the quintessential dream-team of

chamber music. As a person sitting near me said during intermission, “Now that was beautiful.”

While many know Michael Stephen Brown to be an accomplished pianist, he is also a formidable composer, so it was a pleasure to hear his recently premiered *Vortex for Cello and Strings* performed by his longtime duo partner Nicholas Canellakis. Introducing the piece, Brown said that after he showed a draft of the work to the cellist, he was told there weren't “enough beautiful cello melodies,” and after many arguments he realized that his friend was right.

Opening with accented chords, *Vortex* weaves heroic solo passages with a relentless energy in the ensemble while always leaving a space for the soloist to soar and retreat — which Canellakis did with verve, technical brilliance, and musical flair. The cello has more than its fair share of beautiful melodies in its repertoire, but now *Vortex* adds another voice to that list.

Francis Poulenc's spicy *Sextet for Piano and Winds* was given an aggressive performance that rocked. While the work was not well-received by musical traditionalists at its premiere — critic Florent Schmitt referred to it as wandering and vulgar — the piece is now a staple of the wind chamber music repertoire.

Full of both whimsical and sugary tunes, the piece provides ample opportunity for the players to let their imaginations flow. Denis Savelyev (flute), Cynthia Koledo DeAlmedia (oboe), Franklin Cohen (clarinet), William Caballero (horn), Andrew Brady (bassoon), and Roman Rabinovich (piano) brought panache to their solo lines. Brady shined in his first-movement cadenza, and DeAlmedia's solo in the opening of the second movement was captivating. Throughout Rabinovich handled the fiendish piano part without breaking a sweat.

A great performance of a fun piece that left the audience with plenty of tunes to hum on their way home.

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