

ChamberFest Cleveland: transporting listeners into “Other Worlds” (June 22)

by Stephanie Manning



Hearing the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” was not on my ChamberFest Cleveland bingo card. But Brandon Ridenour had other ideas.

“Antonio Vivaldi was the Paul McCartney of his time,” the trumpeter told the audience at the festival’s June 22 concert. Accompanied by string quartet, Ridenour brought his arrangements of both the Beatles and the

Baroque to the program — titled “In Other Worlds” — and made a pretty strong case for the connection between 18th-century opera and 1960s pop.

Saturday evening was ChamberFest’s first time at Federated Church in Chagrin Falls, which boasts a slightly more echoey acoustic than the series’ other venues. Among the strings and piano, Ridenour’s trumpet made a statement, easily asserting the solo role in the arrangements without drowning out his fellow musicians.

Violinists Njioma Grevious and Tai Murray, violist Samuel Rosenthal, and cellist Sterling Elliot formed a cohesive unit, smoothly unifying with the trumpet melody in Vivaldi’s “Agitata da due venti” and crafting bouncy pizzicatos in “Sento in seno ch’in pioggia di lagrime.” The four got to be a little more animated during the pointed and at times forceful arrangement of John Lennon & Paul McCartney’s “Eleanor Rigby” — which Ridenour jokingly called “Eleanor’s Revenge.”

As a performer, Ridenour was calm and centered, with an economy of movement that gave an easy quality to his technical precision. But trading the trumpet for the flugelhorn during Vivaldi’s “Sento” and Lennon & McCartney’s “Blackbird” unlocked even more dimensions to his performance — he produced a gorgeous dark tone while swaying slightly to the music, eyes closed.

Similarly, violinist Tai Murray remained graceful in the face of thorny technical passages during Maurice Ravel’s *Violin Sonata No. 2*. Her swirling waterfall of notes in the aptly-named “Perpetuum mobile” contrasted with the “Blues” movement’s ferocious

pizzicatos, which exploded with energy like a pent-up spring. Pianist Roman Rabinovich seemed to relish his chromatic, crunchy chords in this mysterious and jazzy piece.

Later, Rabinovich joined with soprano Sarah Shafer to perform Samuel Barber's *Hermit Songs*, in which the composer sets a quirky collection of poems written by Medieval Irish monks. Although Shafer had stepped in on a mere two days' notice, she clearly understood the piece quite well. The solemnity she brought to movements like "The Crucifixion" and "Saint Ita's Vision" worked beautifully in the context of the religious venue.

Barber's piece arguably shines the most in the more humorous poems like "The Monk and His Cat," which describes the daily life of the two living in harmony. Shafer's sly, cheeky delivery drew some warm chuckles at the end of both that movement and the preceding "Promiscuity," which gets its point across in two short lines:

*I do not know with whom Edan will sleep,
but I do know that fair Edan will not sleep alone.*

Camille Saint-Saëns' *Septet*, Op. 65 was the big group piece of the night — despite its simple name, it features a rare combination of string quartet, piano, bass, and trumpet. Ridenour moved into more of a supporting role here compared to his earlier appearance, but adding a brass instrument to the mix gives the work a more interesting texture. Pianist Zoltán Fejérvári contributed both a light touch and luscious arpeggios, especially during the final movement.

Cellist Dane Johansen and bassist Nathan Farrington held down the fort with the bass lines, while violinists Njioma Grevious and Diana Cohen and violist Samuel Rosenthal sang off of one another like an orchestral string section. This hidden gem of a piece has so much going on, there's plenty to enjoy on both first and repeated listens.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 26, 2024.

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