

## ChamberFest Cleveland: “Night Moves” at Disciples Church (June 28)

by Kevin McLaughlin

### NIGHT MOVES

It was nice to finally hear one of ChamberFest Cleveland’s “Sacred and Profane” concerts (“Night Moves” on June 28) in a religious setting — Disciples Church in Cleveland Heights — since it

helped the “sacred” music resonate (in more ways than one). As the home of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society’s concerts, it’s a well-loved space to experience chamber music.

It turns out, though, you don’t necessarily need a church — or even voices — to convey the spirituality of the opener, Palestrina’s 1572 motet, *Dominus Jesus in qua nocte*.

After a few seconds, it dawned on the listener how shocking and unlikely an opening this was — starting not with a “pow!” but a prayer. You found yourself listening deeply, as if hypnotized into a state of both emotional and textual understanding. The five strings (violinists Yura Lee and Nathan Meltzer, violists Teng Li and Emad Zolfaghari, and cellist Julie Albers) managed, through some mystery of group interpretation, to project meanings and phonemes of words through subtly delineated bow strokes.

Next came *Histoire du Tango*, Astor Piazzolla’s survey of tango styles from the bordello, café, nightclub, and concert hall. Performed by guitarist Jason Vieaux (appearing at ChamberFest incomprehensibly for the first time) and violinist Yura Lee (who, as always, invested her heart and soul), the familiar work seemed fresh in their hands — thrilling, earnest, and sexy.

Occasional knuckle raps and hand slaps situated the players on the dance floor as they strutted and swaggered in solos but always came back together, locked in each other’s embrace. Control of tempo made the occasional rubato effective, and lavish technical displays heightened the charm.

The Poulenc *Cello Sonata* is not so easily loved as his other instrumental works, especially for winds. Here the composer's cheerful side defers to serious, even academic qualities, and sentiment too — perhaps reflective of the work's wartime origin. But cellist Jonathan Swensen and pianist Roman Rabinovich made a good case for it on Friday night. Swensen applied his prodigious technical gifts and a flexible, expansive sound that occasionally pushed this chamber music into concerto territory.

In the outer movements, the two instruments echoed each other in short phrases, freely swapping melodic and accompanying responsibilities. The players roughhoused their way through the third movement, “Ballabile” — recalling Poulenc's fondness for the music hall — before Rabinovich's sublime opening to the “Cavatina” put a stop to it. It was as sacred a moment as any in this year's “Sacred and Profane” festival.

The concert concluded with an impassioned account of Josef Suk's *Piano Quartet in a*, Op. 1. Suk was just seventeen when he wrote it under the tutelage of Antonín Dvořák, his future father-in-law.

Rabinovich, Zolfaghari, Swensen, and violinist Diana Cohen captured Suk's emotionalism and the work's Czech spirit in each of the four movements, which sounded at times like film music. From the opening chord, the players were united in an explosive distribution of energy. The middle-movement Adagio benefitted from Swensen's quietly expressive solo playing in an *innerlich* farewell melody recalling a theme from Borodin's *String Quartet No. 2*. The finale excited from the very first measure.

Although one wouldn't place this acorn too far from the Dvořák oak, there were also signs of Suk's rebellion in the work's harmonic complexity, its use of violin octaves for excitement and enlarged texture, and its general teenage exuberance.

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