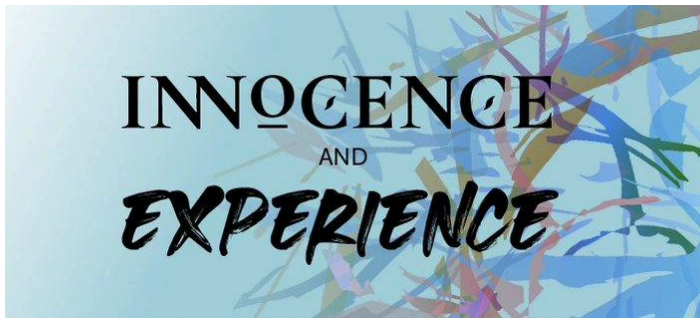


ChamberFest Cleveland: a four-course meal during “Innocence and Experience”

by Stephanie Manning



ChamberFest Cleveland’s June 26 concert had stiffer competition than usual, with The Cleveland Orchestra simultaneously performing for Wade Oval Wednesdays right down the street. But you wouldn’t have known it from the packed house that filled Mixon Hall that evening at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

The program, titled “Innocence and Experience,” marked the long-awaited festival debut of guitarist Jason Vieaux. (Although the venue was no doubt familiar to him — he’s taught at CIM since 1997.) Vieaux and his fellow musicians kicked off the program with Luigi Boccherini’s *Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D*, a lively piece with the subtitle “Fandango.”

Boccherini had a special affinity for the cello, and Jonathan Swensen’s bright, singing tone easily projected his solo moments through the hall. The composer also has the cellist get in on some percussion action, which Swensen approached with gusto. He ricocheted his bow off the strings, and later set everything down to tap on a pair of castanets, hunched over with a single-minded ferocity.

The guitarist’s overall role is more textural, though Vieaux’s expressive strumming came to the fore in the third movement and beyond. The steadily building energy from him and the string players — Swensen, violinists Jacques Forestier and Nathan Meltzer, and violist Emad Zolfaghari — swept the audience to their feet by the final notes.

The other five-person piece on the program, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s *Piano Quintet in G*, Op. 1, features a similarly straightforward four-movement structure. The composer is often compared to his idol Dvořák, but for good reason, especially in early work like this. The grand, sweeping unions of the string section were accentuated by the richness of the piano, here played by Antonio Pompa-Baldi. Violinists Yura Lee and Jacques

Forestier, violist Teng Li, and cellist Julie Albers rounded out the group, whose warm performance invited the audience to simply sit back and enjoy.

Witold Lutosławski's *Partita* demands a little more attention, with its sudden explosions of momentum punctuated by its more mysterious "ad libitum" sections. Violinist Diana Cohen and pianist Roman Rabinovich easily remained in sync despite the twisting branches of notes, staying together without the need for any distracting cues. Cohen's tone had a mature grittiness that was perfect for the work, speaking more to the "experience" versus "innocence" of the program's theme.

The pair's moments of frantic energy were also echoed visually — not just by the piano lid bobbing and a few bow hairs escaping, but also by the birds visible through the windows behind them, which occasionally dashed from tree to tree.

No program is immune to last-minute changes, even by its own performers, and Rabinovich came out after intermission to announce that the two remaining pieces would switch places. "A program is like a meal," he said, and he wanted to make sure Percy Grainger's *Fantasy on George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess"* was the dessert.

Rabinovitch and fellow pianist Yaron Kohlberg definitely enjoyed the indulgence, luxuriating in familiar melodies like "Summertime" and matching each other so closely that their two instruments sounded like one. Their performance made for a natural finale, and the ice cream served afterwards in the lobby — the non-metaphorical dessert — was just the cherry on top.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 1, 2024.

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