

ChamberFest Cleveland celebrates season finale on the dance floor (June 29)

by Stephanie Manning



After a whirlwind three weeks of concerts, ChamberFest Cleveland ended this year's season with a dance party. And not just any dance party: Aaron Jay Kernis' joyfully eccentric *100 Greatest Dance Hits*, which fully embodies the thematic mix of “Sacred

and Profane.”

But while the Kernis gives classical forms an injection of the profane — the music associated with the here-and-now, our day-to-day life — the June 29 program also reveled in the traditionally sacred. It opened with J.S. Bach's dignified *Concerto No. 1 in d*, played in a combination that swapped harpsichord for piano and traded a string orchestra for a quartet, plus bass.

Few composers are as stereotypically associated with classical music's sacredness than Bach, and the mood in the Maltz Performing Arts Center was fittingly still and reverent. Pianist Roman Rabinovich assumed the role of soloist with grace, providing the steady engine that keeps the work running in the outer movements while also being achingly gentle in places like the middle Adagio.

The string ensemble — violinists Yura Lee and Jacques Forestier, violist Emad Zolfaghari, cellist Julie Albers, and bassist Nathan Farrington — knew how to best give Rabinovich his space, at times getting intensely quiet. But they were also integral to the piece's texture, giving a dark and stately aura to the first movement despite its Allegro tempo. Combined, all six players carefully built up the work layer by layer, as if weaving delicate patterns of lace that slowly spread about the room.

George Enescu's *Octet, Op. 7*, which ended the evening, similarly stands out for its complexity. It combines the forces of two string quartets: here the players from the Bach (minus Rabinovich and Farrington) plus violinists Diana Cohen and Nathan Meltzer, violist Teng Li, and cellist Jonathan Swensen. Although this combination of musicians have rarely (if ever) performed together, their group synergy resembled an orchestral

string section that has known each other for years. Like the easy flow of conversation, their lines came together, broke off, and rejoined — and the players relished Enescu’s lyricism throughout.

The axis the program truly revolved around was Aaron Jay Kernis’ *100 Greatest Dance Hits*, which pre-concert speaker and Oberlin musicology professor James O’Leary described as “if Schoenberg were writing *Saturday Night Fever*.” The quintet involved guitarist Jason Vieaux, violinists Cohen and Meltzer, violist Li, and cellist Albers, who energetically approached the first movement’s coordinated dance of hand slaps and pizzicato.

Although the moment proved a bit too intense for one of Meltzer’s strings. “We have a string casualty,” Cohen humorously announced between movements, while her colleague swept backstage for a quick fix.

If the unexpected interruption rattled Meltzer, he didn’t show it, smoothly joining Vieaux’s solo line in the third movement for a beautiful guitar/violin duet. In its slow moments, Kernis’ piece highlights the particularly emotional power of the guitar, which gave Vieaux plenty of soulful, nostalgic moments to take advantage of. But the finale, “Dance Party on a Disco Motorboat,” is more upbeat, incorporating percussion and even some beatboxing for a humorous finish.

“Why is Bach on the same program as disco?” O’Leary had questioned. Perhaps it’s to show how classical music can be just as much about the profane as it is about the sacred — how the everyday joys of the rhythms that get you out on the dance floor can have a quintet shouting, “Dance party!”

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