

**Cleveland Chamber Collective:
Music of America VII (Jan. 12)**

By Kevin McLaughlin



In a program titled *Music of America VII* held on Sunday, January 12 at Disciples Christian Church in Cleveland Heights, the Cleveland Chamber Collective presented a concert of attractive and varied new music, inspired by sounds from around the globe — India to Buenos Aires and Bali to Manhattan.

At two and a half hours, the program might have stood a trimming, but it would be hard to know what to cut — the works and performances by familiar and rising Cleveland professionals were uniformly splendid. Director Ty Alan Emerson served as gracious host as well as stagehand and impresario.

In Reena Esmail’s *Blaze*, a duo for violin (Emily Cornelius) and tabla (Dylan Moffitt) much of the intensity came from Cornelius’s relationship to Moffitt’s exact playing — we were drawn in by the quietness of Moffitt’s tabla and by Cornelius’s attention to it. The two drifted in and out of sync, with the violinist both captive to and rebelling against the insistent rhythm, even while she conjured enigmatic extremes of darkness and ecstasy.

Salad Bar for viola (Brian Slawta), and flute (Linda White), is a six-movement duo by Cincinnati composer Ellen Ruth Harrison, who was in attendance. Inspired by a Baltic family vacation and a pretentious restaurant menu, the movements bespeak weather conditions (“a raw wind blows at all times”) and salad vegetables (cucumbers, tomatoes, dandelions). One movement (tomato salad) is abruptly less whimsical — a lament for those deported from Szczecin, the first German Jews to be taken to the concentration

camps in Poland. White was the composer's expressive ally, her flute playing lithe and agile.

According to Gabriela Lena Frank's program note, her *Manhattan Serenades*, "although light-hearted in nature, demand a high level of agility from both pianist and cellist." The players, cellist Jeff Singler and pianist Eric Charnofsky, showed stylistic dexterity, especially in the sophisticated and jazzy third movement, which sounded a lot like Gershwin, with its flights of improvisation and 1920s swing.

For Ty Alan Emerson's *Pan Dances*, a world premiere, Singler joined Cornelius and Moffitt, who played his own homemade steel pan, an idiosyncratic instrument emitting pitches close to, but not quite in the same zip code as what was expected. The mixture of gentle and eccentric sounds, and obvious enjoyment of the players was charming.

Missy Mazzoli's *Tooth and Nail* is a work for solo viola (Slawta) and electronic playback inspired by Uzbeki music and reminiscent of its jaw's harp tradition. Made up almost entirely of viola samples, the playback creates a counterpoint between the live violist and the pre-recorded facsimile. Slawta was as cool and poised in this high-wire act as any performer, human or machine, could be.

Lou Harrison's *Varied Trio* summarized all that came before it. Often evoking the Javanese gamelan, the score was later transcribed for violin, piano, and percussion by pianist Julie Steinberg, one of the original performers. This is a wonderful piece, touching and imaginative, made even more so by this genial band. Charnofsky and Moffitt played with relish and charm, and Cornelius, contributing violin playing that was velvety and joyous, gave the music wings.

Astor Piazzolla's *Le Grand Tango* was a superbly played finale. Slawta and Charnofsky danced and swayed to Piazzolla's jazz infused tangos. Slawta added elegance and a tinge of tragedy to Piazzolla's sultry music, and Charnofsky provided his usual rock-solid partnership at the piano.

In spite of the program's length the audience erupted in genuine approval. Many stayed to talk with the performers and examine instruments, especially the crazy pan drum, without much prodding.

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