

## **Blue Water Chamber Orchestra debut at the Breen Center (September 12)**

by Daniel Hathaway



On Sunday afternoon, September 12, a new ensemble and a new venue made their joint orchestral debut as the Blue Water Chamber Orchestra played its first concert under its founder and conductor Carlton R. Woods at St. Ignatius High School's Breen Center in Ohio City.

Mr. Woods chose a substantial menu of attractive chamber orchestra works for Blue Water's first

outing: Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Hanson's *Serenade for Flute, Harp and Strings*, Beethoven's *Romance in F* for violin and orchestra, Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* and Ginastera's *Variaciones Concertantes* -- one piece each from France, the US, Austria, England and Argentina that required the orchestra to quickly adapt between national styles.

The ensemble's playing this afternoon under Carlton Wood's experienced leadership was masterful and idiomatic, and a good-sized crowd of friends, family and St. Ignatius students provided Blue Water with an enthusiastic and supportive audience for its maiden voyage.

Woods didn't waste any time getting down to business. *Tombeau* is a tricky piece -- not only because it has to speak with a French accent -- but because of the special demands it puts on wind players. The *Prelude* achieved the requisite Gallic lightness, the *Forlane* was springy, the *Menuet* lyrical and the *Rigaudon* well punctuated by trumpet and winds.

Hanson's lovely, short *Serenade*, dedicated to his harpist fiancée, brought flutist Sean Gabriel to the front of the stage but left harpist Jody Guinn back in the rear of the orchestra. Close your eyes and you wouldn't notice the difference in placement, but the visual effect was odd. Never mind -- the soloists were eloquent and completely assured in their roles. Every bride should have a wedding gift this attractive.

Concertmaster Kenneth Johnston (who also fills this role in the Erie Philharmonic), closed out the first half of the program with a sweetly voiced performance of one of Beethoven's two Romances, this one in F Major.

The Breen Center, which opened last year, is a spacious and welcoming, 450-seat theater with lively acoustics. Six mustard-colored screens served as an backstop for the orchestra. My impression during the first half of the program was that, sitting in the front third of the auditorium, you could hear everything with stunning clarity but warmth of tone and blend between strings and the rest of the orchestra seemed lacking. I moved to the back third for the second half and what a difference! Balances suddenly came into focus and warmth of tone improved markedly.

Elgar's Serenade for Strings always induces Edwardian nostalgia in this listener (probably inherited from watching episodes of "Upstairs, Downstairs"). Listening to this sunny, bucolic music returns you to that mythical time before the Titanic sank and before the Guns of August were heard. Carlton Woods and the strings embarked on a vigorous journey in the Allegro, teased touching moments out of the Larghetto and recapitulated those memorable earlier moments in the Allegretto.

The orchestral showpiece of the afternoon was Ginastera's Concert Variations, described by Woods as "the South American Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra". Beginning with Kent Collier's big cello solo accompanied by Jody Guinn, the work showcased the fine solo talents of violist Laura Shuster, clarinetist Alix Reinhardt, concertmaster Kenneth Johnston, hornist Ken Wadenpfuhl and bassist Ann Gilbert, as well as the fine ensemble acumen of the rest of the orchestra.

Best wishes for Blue Water and its burgeoning relationship with the Breen Center and St. Ignatius. Some tweaking of the acoustical panels at the rear of the stage will doubtless fix a few sonic quirks in the hall. We look forward to another projected large ensemble concert in the Spring.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com Published September 14, 2010*

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