

CityMusic Chamber Orchestra at Fairmount Church (Mar. 20)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The connective tissue of CityMusic Chamber Orchestra's varied program on Thursday, March 20 — a miscellany of music by Caroline Shaw, Felix Mendelssohn, and Franz Schubert — seems to be that there was none, other than the desire to play these disparate and individually charming pieces. I attended the concert at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights and felt

myself fortunate to be in the company of such fine musicians.

Annunziata Tomaro, who has guest conducted for CityMusic before, showed herself to be an engaging presence at the podium. If it were up to me — which it isn't — Tomaro would immediately be engaged as the orchestra's next music director. She's that good.

In *Entr'acte*, Caroline Shaw's adaptation for string orchestra of a work originally for string quartet, the composer shows an understanding of how string instruments work and an affection for their treatment by earlier composers.

By elaborating on a minuet from Haydn's Op. 77, No. 2 (specifically the moment in the trio when the F major scherzo strays into D-flat major), she expands, fantasizes, and creates something utterly new. By introducing a range of extended techniques, she mimics Haydn's form and places musical Rorschach images before the listener, allowing multiple interpretations that may be more comprehensible in retrospect than in the moment.

The CityMusic strings intuited Shaw's *patois*, playing everything with confidence and humor. Principal cello Ming Yao Zhao mesmerized with a closing strummed solo that mulled over the foregoing material, before fading into silence.

Felix Mendelssohn once told the story about showing Franz Liszt the manuscript to his Piano Concerto No. 1 in g, written in 1830–31. Liszt, though he found the score to be “hardly legible,” played it at sight, “better than anybody else could possibly play it — quite marvelously!”

Hearing pianist Roman Rabinovich play the work on Thursday evening, you got the feeling he might have been capable of the same feat. He tackled the cascades of notes of the stormy Allegro agitato with feather-light touch and easy precision. The central *Andante* was lovely and ephemeral, and the finale, with its woodsy, fairy music, reminiscent of Otto Nicolai, was fleet and carefree, supported by waves of warmth from the lower strings. Tomaro was a sympathetic ally, drawing energy and charm from the orchestra. As an encore, Rabinovich selected a particularly gallant movement from a suite by Jean-Philippe Rameau.

After a very slow opening statement, Tomaro launched into the Allegro moderato of Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony at an unhurried pace, with accents. Her conducting was crisp, but with enough grandeur to suggest a much larger ensemble. CityMusic’s strings played with warm, powerful, and beautifully-in-tune radiance. The cello and double bass pizzicatos were carefully plotted.

Tomaro crafted a well-proportioned and unsentimental *Andante con moto*. The woodwinds were especially kind to the ear. Principal clarinet Daniel Gilbert and principal oboe Virginia Kao shaped long, liquid phrases. In sound and volume, the horns and trumpets were sources of Schubertian benevolence. And perhaps mindful of their religious pedigree, the three trombones blended like devout monastics in the back row. Tomaro and Orchestra, having gone as far as Schubert would go, concluded in serenity. Unfinished — maybe, but glorious nonetheless.

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