

## Rocky River Chamber Music Society: horn, violin, and piano make a delightful trio (May 5)

by Stephanie Manning



The Rocky River Chamber Music Society's season-ending concert, featuring the principal horn of The Cleveland Orchestra, was understandably marketed as "Nathaniel Silberschlag & Friends." But the other two names contained in the "& Friends" — violinist Genevieve Smelser and pianist Alicja Basinka — were equally as important to the evening's success.

On May 5 at West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church, the trio of local musicians delivered a wonderfully relaxing evening of chamber music by Johannes Brahms and Charles Koechlin.

Although the combination of horn, violin, and piano isn't a common one, there are more options out there than you might think. Brahms' *Trio in E-flat*, set the standard for this instrumentation in 1865 by effectively substituting horn for cello. Silberschlag's playing emphasized that the horn is no placeholder — his warm smooth sound was controlled, yet expressive.

Throughout the four movements, the musicians seamlessly shifted between moments of upbeat Romanticism and moody solemnity. Fitting, given that the composer wrote this during a forest retreat while he was still grappling with the death of his mother. In the first-movement Andante, some dark clouds hung over the scene even amid the lush textures.

It was clearly hot onstage, as the performers dabbed at their faces between movements and took sips of water. But all were the picture of calm while performing, keeping their body language relatively subtle. In the somber third movement, thought to be an elegy for Brahms' mother, Smelser's gentler vibrato was an asset in the long, lyrical lines. The even-numbered movements brought out more of the horn's traditional role, with fanfares

and hunting calls, and the finale steadily ratcheted up the energy before bringing things to a close.

One of the most exciting parts of the program was hearing Silberschlag explore his instrument outside the assertive orchestral playing he already does so well. He and Smelser, who is also a member of The Cleveland Orchestra, arranged a selection of three Lieder by Brahms, each originally written for two voices and piano, which opened the concert.

Starting with the genial “Es rauschet das Wasser” (The Water Rushes), both violin and horn inhabited “voices” that were charmingly distinct in timbre. The simpler melodies allowed the duo to emphasize the shape of the lines, as in their unison sections during “Weg der Liebe” (The Path to Love). Pianist Alicja Basinka added her own expressive touches with sensitive rubatos in “So lass uns wandern!” (So Let Us Wander).

Charles Koechlin, born more than 30 years after Brahms, was a French composer of eclectic and largely Impressionist tastes. But his *Quatre Petites Pièces* stylistically fit perfectly into the program. The first-movement Andante took advantage of Smesler’s rich middle and low registers, while the second-movement Scherzo featured the twinkling of Basinka’s ascending and descending arpeggios.

The hidden gem of the program, Koechlin’s piece created an atmosphere as peaceful as clouds drifting past. A lovely addition to an evening that invited listeners to simply sit back, relax, and enjoy the music.

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