

ChamberFest Cleveland: “Reflections” at Church of the Saviour (June 13)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The second program of ChamberFest Cleveland’s 2025 season, titled “Reflections,” offered a varied but carefully sequenced triptych, was presented on June 13 at Church of the Saviour in Cleveland Heights. Works by Arvo Pärt, Anton Arensky, and Camille Saint-Saëns captivated with a blend of suspended time, remembrance, and fervent sweep.

Pärt’s *Spiegel im Spiegel* (Mirror[s] in the Mirror) was a remarkable opener, drawing violinist Gabrielle Després and pianist Michael Stephen Brown into a meditative dialogue and listeners into a quasi-hypnotic state. Després’s playing was austere and strangely luminous — testaments to her musical imagination and steady bow arm. She beautifully shaped each phrase — sharpening the listeners’ focus and slowing the collective pulse. Brown’s piano triads resonated with bell-like purity, so finely braided with Després’s lines that the effect was clairvoyant. As each violin note faded, the piano gently cued the next — gestures mirroring one another like eternal reflections in glass.

Arensky’s *String Quartet in a Op. 35*, is a compelling portrait of the composer at his most romantic, elegiac, and contradictory. A student of Rimsky-Korsakov and a devotee of the folk-influenced Russian Nationalist School, Arensky was also an admirer and younger contemporary of the cosmopolitan Tchaikovsky. Through careful pacing and harmonic awareness, the musicians evoked Arensky’s dignified homage to Tchaikovsky, but folklore was present here too.

In the opening Moderato, the lower-register sonorities offered by cellists Bryan Cheng and Annie Jacobs-Perkins created a rich, velvety foundation, and violinist Diana Cohen and violist Natalie Loughran honored Russian song inflection like native singers. In the opening Moderato, Cohen contributed long-lined melodies with nuanced phrasing, while the inner voices crafted a dialogue that felt both intimate and psychological.

Arensky's use of Tchaikovsky's song "Legend" in the middle movement again pays tribute to the older composer. In this performance, the variations unfolded from hushed lament to subtly heightened fervor, culminating in a radiant and heartfelt climax in the final coda.

The Finale begins with a lively theme in a dance-like, rustic vein — contrasting sharply with the elegiac tone of the preceding variations. Later, Arensky reintroduces the funeral chant heard at the start of the quartet, circling back to the Orthodox liturgical music that frames the entire work. Cheng and Jacobs-Perkins interlocked lines, grounding the music's mournful arch with sustained warmth while Cohen and Loughran hovered above in a slow, chant-like chorus.

Saint-Saëns' gorgeous *Piano Quintet in a*, Op. 14 opened with pianist Roman Rabinovich and strings in tight lockstep — the first movement's brooding themes sculpted with muscular precision. In the slow movement, piano and strings traded lyrical lines with understated grace. Gabrielle Després and Maria Ioudenitch brought out violin melodies elegantly while violist Njord Kårason Fossnes enriched the inner textures.

The scherzo was agile and buoyant — Rabinovich's articulation crisp, the strings equally precise — but the clincher came with Nathan Farrington's double bass entry. It was startling enough to see the great instrument suddenly emerge from behind a potted plant, but its impact on the ensemble's timbre was still more surprising: a transformation to something "faintly macabre," as Rabinovich characterized it.

Momentum carried directly into the expansive finale, tying together rhythmic, thematic, and contrapuntal ideas from earlier in the quintet. Rabinovich anchored the ensemble with assertive, sharply etched piano work, while Després and Ioudenitch shaped beautiful violin lines. Despite the movement's drive, both Fossnes and Cheng were also given ample moments of lyricism. All instruments joined in a final push toward an exultant close. This is music that must be great fun to play.

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