

ChamberFest takes its audience on a journey in “Songs, Signs, and Souvenirs” (June 28)

by Stephanie Manning



During this year’s ChamberFest, the “Lost and Found” theme showed up in all kinds of ways. Sometimes that meant performing recently-unearthed works from historic composers like Mozart and Chopin. Sometimes it referred to an emotional resonance, as when Judith Markovich’s music told the story of the grief and loss of a son.

But the listener has a role to play in this as well. As ChamberFest’s past Board chair Rebecca Carmi reminded the audience on June 28, getting “lost” in the music is also an experience to strive for. Thankfully, the engrossing final concert of ChamberFest’s 2025 season — held in Severance Music Center’s Reinberger Chamber Hall — provided plenty of opportunities.

Brahms’ *Piano Quintet in c minor* is a chamber music staple, but the combination of the intimate acoustic space and the palpable dedication of the players made Saturday’s performance feel like a rare event. Violinists Geneva Lewis and Diana Cohen, violist Kim Kashkashian, cellist Jonathan Swensen, and pianist Roman Rabinovich gave a sense of purpose to practically every phrase, making the most of the dynamic contrasts.

Rabinovich provided a grounded, responsive foundation that helped the string players shine — especially Swensen, whose rich tone shaped his solo moments. And in the biggest group moments, the concert hall vibrated with their ferocious energy.

Kashkashian’s distinct viola timbre stood out, a reminder of her soloistic presence. Earlier in the evening, she took the stage alone to perform selections from György Kurtág’s *Signs, Games, and Messages* and to talk about her experiences working with the Hungarian composer. “His compositions are miracles of fabulous geometry,” she

said, explaining that the short movements of this piece were designed for players to train their technique, stretching the boundaries of what the instrument can do.

The extended silences and sparse notation mean that these little etudes require plenty of concentration from both listener and performer, but Kashkashian's assured interpretation kept things interesting. She integrated her breath into the long lines of double stops in movements like "In memoriam Aczél György" and the muted "Virág — In memoriam Anneliese Nissen-Zsigmondy." The brief bursts of energy found in "Flapping-slapping" and "Chromatic discussion," which resembled a blustery argument, kept the mood from remaining completely solemn and elicited a few audience chuckles.

Mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron also made for an engaging solo presence in pieces by Chausson and Beethoven. Violinists Itamar Zorman and Geneva Lewis, violist Emad Zolfaghari, cellist Sterling Elliott, and pianist Roman Rabinovich joined her for Chausson's captivating *Chanson perpétuelle*, which opened the concert with Barron's moody, beautiful low range. The melancholic nature of the text was evident even without looking at the translation page.

Later, Barron changed her teal blue outfit to a red one, mirroring the energy shift from Chausson to Beethoven's *Scottish Songs*. Barron, Zorman, Swensen, and pianist Amy Yang all radiated charisma — especially in the second movement "O! Sweet were the hours," which vacillated between nostalgic longing and peppy calls for celebration.

"Who here likes to sing?" Barron asked playfully before the fifth movement. Not many hands went up, but she got most of us singing anyway during the drinking song "Come fill, fill, my good fellow!" And every time the chorus arrived, the stage doors swung open to reveal a few ChamberFest players happily dancing on the sides. Singing or not, it was impossible not to smile.

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