

## ChamberFest Cleveland: “Starry Night” (June 21)

by Kevin McLaughlin



On June 21, ChamberFest Cleveland presented “Starry Night” at Federated Church in Chagrin Falls. The program’s nocturnal theme included works by ChamberFest composer-in-residence Errollyn Wallen, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Arnold Schoenberg.

The performance of Wallen’s *Dervish* for cello and piano was spellbinding. Like a trained actor, cellist Oliver Herbert took on a distinct persona: intensely expressive, earthy, and rapturous.

Pianist Roman Rabinovich was not merely a counterpart, but a force that Herbert seemed at times either to resist or to be swept up by. Together, the duo sustained an inward intensity that made Wallen’s music feel at once intimate, expansive, and hypnotic.

Beethoven’s *Piano Trio No. 1* in D major, Op. 70, No. 1 (“Ghost”) received its nickname from composer’s pupil Carl Czerny, who thought the second movement reminded him of the ghost scene in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Rabinovich forewarned the audience that pianist Zijian Wei’s performance would be special — he heard it at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, where Wei took top prize — and indeed it was.

Wei, along with violinist Diana Cohen and cellist Raman Ramakrishnan brought buoyant energy and crisp articulation to the outer movements, while allowing the *Largo* to unfold

at a leisurely, mysterious pace. Wei shaped Beethoven's trembling figures with quiet menace, a supporting gesture to Cohen's hushed lyricism and Ramakrishnan's smoky cello figures. The ensemble's tonal cohesion and finely balanced dynamics heightened the drama.

Schoenberg's string sextet *Verklärte Nacht* received a finely shaped and deeply attentive reading. Violinists Kristin Lee and David McCarroll were supple and focused, violists Emad Zolfaghari and Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt contributed warm, agile tones, and cellists Raman Ramakrishnan and Oliver Herbert let hedonism creep in where the music demanded it. Schoenberg's dense textures and shifting moods became transparent in the players' hands, allowing the work's ecstatic beauty to shine through.

First violinist Lee was a strong presence throughout. She led the ensemble by example, with committed phrases and precise rhythm, even through its ebbs and flows. She let her soaring lines hover above the ensemble, prolonging tension and allowing Schoenberg's long, arching gestures to unfold naturally. The final coda arrived not as a sudden transformation, but as a hard-won release.

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