

## ChamberFest Cleveland: “Inventions of Memory (June 27)”

by Kevin McLaughlin



ChamberFest Cleveland’s June 27 program, *Inventions of Memory*, offered three distinct meditations on musical remembrance. Presented in the tranquil setting of Harkness Chapel at Case Western Reserve University, eight of the festival’s standout artists illuminated works by Claude Debussy, Brett Dean, and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

The program opened with Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, a cycle of idealized and slightly prurient visions of antiquity. Mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron and pianist Roman Rabinovich offered a reading attuned to the music’s erotic undertow and bathed in Lydian and whole-tone harmonies.

In *La Flûte de Pan*, Rabinovich’s shimmering textures evoked the strumming of a lyre as Barron spun out the tale of a young girl’s intimate flute lesson. Her voice, pliant and sumptuous, moved easily between innocence and seduction. *La Chevelure* opened with a searching piano line that gave way to vocal reverie in Barron’s smokiest lower register. The cycle closed with *Le Tombeau des naïades*, a frostbitten elegy that replaced summer sensuality with wintry loss. Here, Barron’s voice turned inward, haunted and still, evoking a mythic world where nymphs and satyrs are long gone and innocence is left behind.

Brett Dean’s *Epitaphs* is a five-movement work for string quintet, each section a compact elegy dedicated to a departed friend or colleague. In this performance, the ensemble — violinists Geneva Lewis and Itamar Zorman, violists Emad Zolfaghari and Kim Kashkashian, and cellist Sterling Elliott — brought out the distinctive sound world created by Dean’s equal treatment of the two violins and two violas.

The opening movement, “Only I will know,” dedicated to Australian poet Dorothy Porter, unfolded with hushed intensity and a lyrical sense of secrecy — perhaps mimetic

of Porter's *Sniff the air* (the poem Dean cites in his program notes). The quintet's sound was delicate yet charged, echoing the poet's tone of personal farewell.

"Walk a little way with me" — in memory of Australian solicitor and writer Lyndal Holt — offered a gentler, more communal grief. The players shaped its warmly voiced textures with compassion and grace, highlighting the movement's sense of shared journey and tender humor.

The central movement, "Der Philosoph," dedicated to Berlin Philharmonic cellist Jan Diesselhorst, bore its intellectual weight and introspection heavily. Elliott's cello lines — by turns solemn and searching — presided, while the ensemble articulated Dean's diversely layered textures.

The most stylistically particularized movement, "György meets the 'Girl Photographer,'" pays homage both to Los Angeles arts patron and photographer Betty Freeman, and to composer György Ligeti, whose spirit hovers over it palpably. The players navigated fractured rhythms, rapid-fire exchanges, and shifting meters with astonishing cohesion. Ligeti-esque gestures — clustered glissandi, fluttering figuration, and kaleidoscopic textures — ebbed and flowed like electric current. The effect was witty, volatile, and strangely affectionate.

The final movement, "Between the spaces in the sky," written for conductor Richard Hickox, drifted toward transcendence. Anchored by soft tremolos and sustained harmonics, the movement gradually dissolved into ethereal textures. Dean's use of "shepherd tones" — the illusion of endlessly rising pitch — heightened the sensation of a slow, infinite ascent. As the last chord faded, the silence that followed felt like part of the music.

Closing the program was Tchaikovsky's monumental *Piano Trio in A minor*, a work that manages to be both a public elegy and private milestone. In her brisk but illuminating pre-concert talk, Case doctoral student and Tchaikovsky specialist Celine Gosselin pointed out much to listen for and appreciate.

Written in memory of composer and administrator Nikolai Rubinstein, the Trio unfolds in two movements: a sweeping, elegiac Moderato, followed by a sprawling theme and variations. Pianist Roman Rabinovich served as the work's resident virtuoso, matching élan with extreme subtlety and grace. Violinist Itamar Zorman and cellist Jonathan Swensen joined him in his demonstrative interpretation, both exhibiting ravishing tone and ardent intent without losing sight of the long line.

Swensen's face, a movie reel of expressive emotion, was worth a prolonged gaze. The central variations danced, sang, and wept in turn, and the closing pages circled back to the first movement's funereal despair.

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