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ChamberFest Cleveland:
Appalachian Spring (June 17) & Crossroads (June 18)

by Daniel Hathaway



While it's unusual to see two composers taking credit for a single composition, the 18th-century Catalonian brothers Josep Pla and Joan Baptista Pla are an exception, having jointly crafted many works including trio sonatas.

On Wednesday, June 17 in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, ChamberFest Cleveland opened their concert "Appalachian Spring" with a terrific performance of the Pla brothers' *Trio Sonata in D minor* for oboe (Izaiah Cheera), violin (Julia Schilz), cello (Julie Albers), harpsichord (Adam Golka), and percussion (Jeff Stern).

Throughout the engaging piece, Cheeran produced a beautiful oboe tone while making the sonata's many (and long) technical passages sound easy. During the lighthearted opening movement, extended lyrical lines were expertly traded between the players. And yes, there was percussion. Stern's rhythms on the *cajon* were inspired, adding a new dimension to the Baroque era composition.

Schilz brought elegance and a sense of direction to her violin lines in the melancholic Andante, joining her colleagues in striking ensemble passages. Stern changed out his *cajon* for the *riq,* a hand drum resembling a tambourine, adding Spanish flair to the zippy Allegro Assai, whose easy flowing lines brought this unusual sonata to a delightful conclusion.

This program included the first of three works by ChamberFest composer-in-residence Benjamin Yusupovto to be featured during the festival. On Wednesday evening, Yusupovto took the title role in his *Piano Trio No. 2,* "From Jewish Traditions," joined by violinist Elizabeth Fayette and cellist Karen Ouzounian.

Each of the work's three movements is derived from a different Jewish musical tradition. The first, based on the Ashkenazi song "Mayn shtetele Belz," included loud chords, thumps inside the piano, slides in the cello and violin, captivating harmonies, long lines interrupted by piano accents, and folksong quotations in the violin. The players felt the music viscerally.

The second, an improvisation based on "La yave de Espanya," a song of the Deportees of Spain (1492), incorporated what sounded like ancient, mournful cries. The prepared piano setup allowed chords to ring out as the movement built to symphonic scale.

The third, based on the Yemenite song "Esh'al Elohai," is a brisk dance featuring prominent rhythmic figures and ending with a resounding final chord.

The players gave this cerebral and challenging work a committed, enthralling reading.

The concert ended with a flawless, unconducted performance of its namesake, the 13-musician version of Aaron Copland's "Ballet for Martha." While we wouldn't ordinarily call out individual names in an ensemble so large, every cog in this musical machine was so essential to the success of *Appalachian Spring* that we'll raise up the entire roster: Sophia Jean (flute), Jay Shankar (clarinet), John Clouser (bassoon), Adam Golka (piano), Andrew Wan & Julia Schilz (violin I), Diana Cohen & Yun Ting Lee (violin II), Njord Fossnes & Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt (violas), Julie Albers & Karen Ouzounian (cellos), and Gabriel Polinsky (bass).

Probably many in the sold-out audience left Mixon Hall humming "Simple Gifts" on their way home.



Some concerts are sublime and inspiring, others are just plain fun. ChamberFest Cleveland's "Crossroads" on June 18 in Mixon Hall was an example of the latter.

Whatever “Crossroads” meant to the organizers, the five works on the program were all delightful in different ways.

First up was Bjarne Brustad’s *Capricci for Violin and Viola*. Throughout the well-structured, four movement work, violinist Julia Schilz and violist Njord Fossnes produced beautiful sounds and were as much fun to watch as they were to hear.

The players presented the opening Moderato as a jovial conversation between the two instruments. In the second movement, Lento, they sang a love song to each other and in the third, went off to a country dance. Schilz and Fossnes dialed up their relationship bringing their full firepower to the concluding Vivace.

Benjamin Yusupov’s *Crossroads No. 2* was the second of three works by ChamberFest’s composer-in-residence to be heard during the festival, this one in an arresting performance by pianist Adam Golka.

Seizing attention from the outset with a thunderous opening from bottom to top of the keyboard (it could have been improvised by Golka), Yusupov goes on to juxtapose liturgical chants with modal harmonies. The piece transcends multiple musical boundaries and earns its place in the fun category by never letting on what’s coming next.

Sergei Prokofiev’s *Quintet for Winds and Strings,* a sarcastic score for the composer’s ballet *Trapeze* was played with snarky conviction by oboist Izaiah Cheeran, clarinetist Jay Shankar, violinist Diana Cohen, violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, and bassist Gabriel Polinsky.

The ensemble produced other-worldly sounds in the opening theme and variations, where Cheeran’s oboe playing sounded like a snake charmer. The crazy second variation doubled back to the theme via a striking transition by Polinsky.

Classy playing of multiple earworms defined the performance of Louis Spohr’s *Nonet in F major*. Throughout, Sophia Jean (flute), Izaiah Cheeran (oboe), Jay Shankar (clarinet), John Clouser (bassoon), Nelson Ricardo Yovera Perez (horn), Andrew Wan (violin), Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt (viola), Karen Ouzounian (cello), and Gabriel Polinsky (bass), produced great dynamic contrasts, and finely-wrought wind solos paved over bare spots in the composer’s concepts and orchestration, validating Spohr’s slot in the Fun Music Hall of Fame.

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