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ChamberFest Cleveland: *Appalachian Spring* (June 17)

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.

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