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Worcester Chamber starts season with bold, invigorating program

By Joel Popkin TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

At first glance it looked like the Worcester Chamber Music Society had invited us to its sixth season for an evening of "interesting music" – so often a euphemism for esoteric, inaccessible, or experimental concert fare. Happily, that was anything but the case. Not to say that much was hummable, but the sounds and rhythms were thought-provoking and invigorating, so fittingly described by violinist Rohan Gregory as "stepping into the jungle." And so we listeners treaded cautiously, guided by a map of a carefully thought-out and connected grouping of works.

An Argentine by birth, Astor Piazzolla grew up in New York City. He studied music there, later in Buenos Aires (including mentoring by Alberto Ginastera), and finally in Paris, where he at last succumbed to his love for tango music. Ultimately he was to devote the rest of his life to his enormously successful creation of the "Nuevo Tango."

"Four, for Tango" is not by any means your average "New Tango" – in fact, for the first two minutes it is unrecognizable as that genre. The WCMS delivered its grueling rhythmic drive and unique percussive sounds with precision and passion, demonstrating right upfront that they were not to be intimidated by its complexities. With high-pitched shrieks of the strings, one couldn't help but feel the presence of Alfred Hitchcock. Yet, despite the almost jarring dissonances at times, the WCMS successfully evoked the sensuality that defines tango.

Now a professor at Holy Cross, Argentinean Osvaldo Golijov's defining moment came at age 10 at an Astor Piazzolla concert. In 2001, using the setting of two Emily Dickinson poems, he composed "How Slow the Wind," channeling his response to the death of his friend Mariel Stubrin into this stunning work. Maria Ferrante sang the upper registers with a gorgeous lilting tone, and when pushed down to the lower octaves, still emerged with remarkable resonance. Her emotional range from pathos to rapture was every bit as startling. With the haunting lyricism of "Lúa Descolorida," Ms. Ferrante pierced her audience with such controlled emotional intensity that at the conclusion several collective breaths delayed its spirited response.

Heitor Villa-Lobos at age 18 departed from his presumed career as a Brazilian street musician to travel throughout the interior of his country. After a decade of study of indigenous folk music, he plunged into composition. No Latin American composer before, or in the 100 hundred years since, would achieve his level of fame.

His "Duo for Violin and Viola," unfortunately, strayed into the "interesting" category. Not to dismiss its complexities, but passion and creativity seemed to lag behind the rest of the program's vibrancy. The exceptionally well-spoken strings of Krista Buckland Reisner and Peter Sulski could not entirely rescue what seemed inherently more of a composer's personal exercise than a work for the listener to relish. (Might the "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5" have been a better choice?) On the other hand, Villa-Lobos' "Assobio a Jato" (The Jet Whistle) renewed the evening's jubilation. A duo for flute and cello, the first movement erupts in a wonderful cello driven rhythm, with a flute melody that is sparkling and fun. The Adagio is a lyrical interplay between the two instruments. The culmination of the last movement, marked Vivo, comes when the flutist blows directly into the mouthpiece, while performing a glissando. I don't think the whistle actually surfaced, but flutist Tracy Krause and cellist Jan Muller-Szeraws otherwise gave an inspired performance.

It almost sounded like Bartok, but it was another Argentine, Alberto Ginastera, whose "String Quartet No. 1" closed the program. This is passionate – and, yes, disturbing – music, despite its folk tune derivation.

The first movement, appropriately marked "Allegro violento ed agitato," and the "Vivacissimo" second bring frenetic driving rhythms and jarring dissonances that could easily fluster a less mature group, but the WCMS showed discipline and complete control. The "Calmo" movement provided a necessary infusion of quiet down time, including striking harmonics from violinist Reisner and masterful interactions from her fellow musicians, who performed this piece as if they had practiced it together for years. The wildly energetic fourth movement provided the last set of unusual sounds for the evening, and like those that preceded, made perfect sense in the musical context.

Peter Sulski's bold programming was a welcome challenge to the performers and the audience; the former dazzled, while the latter responded with a truly deserved standing ovation, signaling the need for more frequent gallops away from our reliance on old warhorses.

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