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Worcester Chamber Music Society delights audience

By John Zeugner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

In the joint, casually low-key pre-concert talk before the Worcester Chamber Music Society's concert last night at Assumption College, guest clarinetist Douglas Metcalf remarked that the composers of the first two pieces, Manuel de Falla and Sergei Prokofiev, liked to "push the envelope." He might have been characterizing the WCMS itself — since that group programmatically loves to explore musical outliers.

Last night's concert was arranged thematically to celebrate Paris in the 1920s (perhaps a fortuitous nod to Woody Allen's Oscar nominated film) with the first half delivering the requisite dissonant forays and rhythmic surprises from de Falla and Prokofiev, and the second capturing the icy, celestial beauty of that city — five French songs rendered, as always, in Maria Ferrante's shimmering soprano voice — as well as the city's surging romance — manifest in Gabriel Faure's piano quartet No. 2, which WCMS's brochure labeled "hot blooded." Indeed.

In the pre-concert talk pianist/harpsichordist extraordinaire Ian Watson mentioned that de Falla's piece, although titled "Concerto for Harpsichord," was really more of an ensemble composition. And so it was, with the unusual accompaniment of flute (Tracy Kraus) clarinet (Metcalf), oboe (Demetrios Karamintzas) and cello (David Russell). The power of that combination of instruments seemed occasionally to overwhelm and bury Watson's nimble playing, so that the harpsichord sounded more continuo than concerto. Later the reviewer learned from Lance Schachterle that de Falla had composed the piece for Wanda Landowska, who in the 1920s played on mammoth, reverberant harpsichords quite able to outmuscle the accompaniment. Watson's instrument had no such capability, but that had the happy effect of foregrounding the complex melodies traded around by the wind instruments and Russell's masterful cello. A rarely heard and very beguiling opening piece.

Prokofiev's Quintet brought violinist Rohan Gregory, violist Peter Sulski, and double bassist Anthony D'Amico together with Metcalf and Karamintzas. The six movements formed a kind of suite Prokofiev composed for a ballet "Trapeze." And one could perhaps find a story of sorts in the music, but most critics acknowledge that Prokofiev jettisoned the ballet tale and struck off on his own, richly exploring the possibilities of dissonance and surprise. Those elements of his genius would be sorely restricted and suppressed after his perilous return to the Soviet Union in 1936, until his, and Stalin's, death in 1953. In the later movements the double bass does a lot of heavy lifting, from pizzicato accompaniment to very deep melodic bowing and D'Amico handled those assignments superbly.

After the intermission the music entered more familiar terrain. With typically captivating insouciance soprano Maria Ferrante brought a hush to the capacity crowd filling all three naves of Assumption's wood-arched chapel. She moved adroitly through five French songs, concluding with Leo Delibes' "Les filles de Cadix" that has the line: "This gold is yours." Recognizing that gold of bell-clear singing and carefully supportive accompaniment by pianist William Ness, the audience gave Ferrante the loudest ovation thus far.

Quite astonishingly the final piece, Faure's piano quartet, extended the audience's excitement and delight. Watson was back and this time at a full-bore piano. He was joined with WCMS regulars Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), David Berger (viola) and David Russell (cello). They tore into the lush romanticism of the piece. Watson sent out rippling melodies, picked up by Reisner's piercing tone. The balance and articulation among the four instruments was intoxicating. Berger's solo viola moments in the adagio third movement had a delicious lush resonance that dialogued magically with Watson's precise piano lines. And the foursome plunged into the ever-building final allegro, pouring energy and conviction into the mega-crescendo that brought the audience cheering to its feet. An ovation that underscored what a gift WCMS is to the

musical life of Central Massachusetts.

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