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Intricate Chamber concert earns standing ovation

MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

In a program titled "Songs of Innocence and Experience," Worcester Chamber Music Society challenged a full and very warm (in all senses) audience Saturday night in the upper hall of First Baptist Church. The first half of the concert was full of surprises, beginning with the opening piece, Arthur Foote's "A Night Piece for Flute and String Quartet."

Composed during World War I by Massachusetts-born-and-trained Foote (a charter member of the so called Boston Six composers, which included Edward MacDowell, and Amy Beach) the piece has a very 19th century romantic cast, melodic and sweetly predictable, but ravishingly played by WCMS flutist Tracy Kraus in conjunction with the quartet: Krista Buckland Reisner and Amy Rawstron violins, Peter Sulski, viola, and guest artist Joshua Gordon, cello.

As if to clear the palate of that gushing movie-theme sweetness, WCMS brought out veteran soprano Maria Ferrante, who always delights WCMS audiences.

Instead of the soaring coloratura runs expected of her, Ferrante surprised the audience with a visceral, almost snarling, delivery of Kurt Weill's "Surabaya Johnny" from the Broadway production "Happy End."

She quickly followed with a much lighter, milder French intoning of "Youkali," which ended with classic Ferrante silvery high tones that seemed to shiver the glass scones on the walls. Then she roared back into chanteuse mode with a stunning "A Stranger Here Myself" from "One Touch of Venus." She belted out "And I'll find the key to his ignition," and clearly had done so with the audience.

There was a musical progression from Foote to Weill to the first half's finale, an original composition by WCMS viola player Mark Berger.

In his notes to the piece Berger called it a meditation on T.S. Eliot's poem "The Dry Salvages," which ends his massive "Four Quartets" and is set on Boston's North Shore at Cape Ann. The music in seven challenging movements illustrates the sense of loss and mourning in that poem, as well as its lovely descriptors of the beach and sea.

The string trio (Berger, Reisner, Gordon) explored harmonics and rhythms light years beyond Foote and Weill. The music is occasionally programmatic, emulating seagull calls, fog swishes or sea swells, and at the same time abstractly focused on an aching loss and ironically layered mourning. Parts are not immediately accessible, certainly not on the first hearing. But the piece has a disturbing and enveloping musical solemnity.

The concert's second half pulled things back into a familiar territory: Schubert and Mozart. Pianist William Ness joined Reisner and Gordon in a solid reading of Schubert's truncated "Notturmo." They kept the melodic thread pulsating neatly, marred only toward the end with some less emphatic pizzicato work while Ness re-established the line.

The last piece was Mozart's towering Quintet in G-minor, K516. In the spring and summer of 1787 while the Americans were hammering out a Constitution, Mozart was flooding the world with glorious music, "Don Giovanni," two seminal quintets, the Coronation Piano Concerto, a piano sonata for four hands.

The G-minor Quintet in the 19th century was probably the most played Mozart piece. Most commentators argue that the

double adagio (in the third and fourth movements) signals a sense of loss and mourning that may or may not be overcome in the lilting dancelike finish to the work. As such there was a programmatic link with Berger's earlier composition — a reminder how skillfully WCMS puts its programs together.

The intimate setting of WCMS concerts allows listeners to follow the intricate interplay of the five instruments yielding nuances and trades that get blurred on CD versions.

But that's a double-edged gift. One could sense a certain letdown, tiredness in the first three movements, rescued at the end by a joyous finale that fully deserved its standing ovation.

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