

To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Click here to return to previous page](#)

Article published Apr 13, 2015

Worcester Chamber Music Society explores Bach's influence at concert

By Jonathan Blumhofer TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

The Worcester Chamber Music Society wrapped up its ninth season on Sunday afternoon in Mechanics Hall's Washburn Hall with "Bach and Beyond," a brief exploration of the eponymous cornerstone of Western music and two composers influenced, in various ways, by his example.

The most recent piece on Sunday's concert was WCMS composer-in-residence Mark Berger's "Kaleidoscope." Scored for viola, marimba and piano, the work is based on an array of harmonic spectra derived from the "Sarabande" from Bach's C minor Cello Suite.

It's brief — only about ten minutes in length — opening with a series of explosive, spastic gestures. Gradually, things settle down and a more rhythmically taut section emerges, after the climax of which a short coda provides an enigmatic close to the piece. Throughout, the counterpoint is densely active and the harmony largely chromatic.

Berger uses his three instruments in striking ways. He draws colorful sonorities from piano and marimba — both percussion instruments — playing the same (or similar) material, as well as the viola with piano (there was some fine dovetailing of viola pizzicato with keyboard arpeggios over the last third of "Kaleidoscope"). Pianist Sarah Bob, percussionist Robert Schulz and Berger, himself and accomplished violinist/violist, gave the piece an impassioned reading.

I found "Kaleidoscope" engrossing. It's well written and never dull. In fact, I wouldn't have minded hearing it again after intermission — the score's complexity means that it doesn't reveal all its secrets on first hearing and Sunday's concert was on the short side — but the single time through made a strong impression.

Prefacing "Kaleidoscope" with the C minor Suite's "Sarabande," played on Sunday with deeply moving, inward-focused intensity by Joshua Gordon, was a smart stroke. It anchored Berger's recent exploration of sonority in music that's familiar but also, itself, visionary: Bach's aching melodic line somehow never fails to sound anything but fresh and contemporary.

Sunday's other Bach-influenced score was the "Cantilena" from Heitor Villa-Lobos' "Bachianas Brasileiras no. 5," sung with warm tone and obvious sympathy by soprano Maria Ferrante, who was accompanied in it by pianist Bob.

Ferrante was also in good voice throughout Bach's Cantata no. 209, "He Knows Not What Sorrow Is." Some underpowered flourishes in the closing aria notwithstanding, hers was a crisp, rhythmically vibrant account, stylishly backed up by the WCMS's (almost) full complement for the afternoon: flautist Tracy Kraus, violinists Krista Buckland Reiser and Berger, violist Peter Sulski, cellist Gordon and harpsichordist Andrus Madsen.

The program closed with a selection of thirteen of the "Goldberg Variations" in Dmitry Sitkovsky's 1985 arrangement for string trio. Despite a few patchy ensemble moments early on, Reiser, Sulski, and Gordon made an appealing ensemble in this music, the highlights of which were beautifully voiced accounts of the "Aria," a mesmeric Variation no. 25, and a delightfully straight reading of the "Quodlibet."

For an encore, most everybody (minus, this time, Ferrante, Bob, and Berger) returned for Vivaldi's "La Folia." The performance was led by Reiser's confident fiddle playing, which, on repetitions of the melodic material, colored the proceedings with some judicious embellishments.

