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WCMS marks 10 years with powerful and wide-ranging performance

Worcester Chamber Music Society celebrated its first decade of amazing music-making with a wondrously emotional concert Saturday night at Tuckerman Hall. The program, dubbed "Birthday Bash," was also in memory of Professor Thomas Keil, a longtime supporter and student of the group, whose passion for the cello was matched only by his creative devotion to physics instruction at WPI. The selections reflected Keil's eclectic tastes, in music and life, from the slyly playful to the stunningly sublime.

The first half ranged over music of the late 19th and 20th centuries that had connections, direct or indirect, to films and folk songs. Jonathan Blumhofer's program notes and, even better, his audio podcasts on the WCMS website are masterful introductions to this music. The composer Nino Rota whose notoriety from his scores for Fellini and Coppola movies ("La Dolce Vita," and "The Godfather" Parts I & II) tends to drown out the deftness of his Trio for Flute, Violin and Piano, adroitly rendered by WCMS Tracy Kraus, Rohan Gregory and guest pianist Sonya Ovrutsky Fensome. As always, Kraus drew sweet, plaintive tone from her flute in the trio's tender second movement, and Hollywoodesque intensity to match Ovrutsky Fensome's frenzied percussive piano work in the explosive third movement.

There followed two brief, beguiling excerpts to film scores by Dmitri Shostakovich. Lately the onion of Shostakovich's genius has revealed new, more marvelous layers. While the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony nearly daily explore the blazing range of his 15 symphonies, more and more of his lost piano artistry (he paid bills by accompanying silent films) and film scores make their way into public consciousness. Naxos has brought out CDs of the rich music he penned for Russian movies: "Hamlet"; "Odná"; "New Babylon"; and "The Unforgettable Year 1919."

WCMS musicians Kraus, Gregory and pianist William Ness romped through an Allegretto from "King Lear," and then duo cellists, Joshua Gordon and Ariana Falk, delighted the audience with the Prelude to The Gadfly. These very brief episodes reminded listeners that Shostakovich's brilliant jokester element could generate absolute laughing joy, as well as the bitter, strident satire over his entanglements with Soviet censorship.

The concluding piece of the first half introduced the audience to the supple, mesmerizing playing of clarinetist Julian Milkis. Sergei Prokofiev's Overture on Jewish Themes, Op. 34 borrowing from Eastern European folk traditions spins out klezmer-like melodies for the clarinet that resonate outtakes from "Fiddler on the Roof," but eventually Milkis allows WCMS regulars Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), Peter Sulski (viola), David Russell (cello) and Gregory (violin) into the action, mostly with bounce and enthusiasm, and an eerily haunting, occasional interplay between the violin and clarinet that suggests a transcendence of the quotidian.

The concert's second half picks up the transcendence theme with a vengeance. In deft pre-concert remarks, Rohan argued that Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, like Beethoven's late quartets, Mahler's 9th Symphony, Strauss's Four Last Songs, moved music into a blessed, sacred realm — as if pure music's beauty could lay out a path to acceptance of mortality. Rohan suggested that both rage and resignation flowed through such sublime music, but that the ultimate effect was flowing acceptance.

The quintet vividly illustrated Rohan's contentions. And supremely drawing it together was the astonishing range and luscious tone of Milkis' clarinet playing. Like a master puppeteer Milkis' magic seemed to draw out similar tones from Buckland Reisner, Gregory, Sulski and Russell. But atop their superb playing was Milkis' purity and perfectly modulated phrasing, his bell clear articulation and swooning, swelling rendering of Brahms' heart-breaking music.

The Brahms piece was an appropriate exclamation point to WCMS's 10-year triumph. "The caliber of these musicians has been an extraordinary gift to the students, families, audiences of Worcester," observed Kathleen Corcoran, the first president of WCMS. An extraordinary gift indeed.



PHOTO/ T&G STAFF/STEVE LANAVA

The musicians of the Worcester Chamber Music Society perform during the "Birthday Bash" Saturday at Tuckerman Hall.