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WCMS soars beyond traditional at Worcester Historical Museum concert

The Worcester Chamber Music Society will shortly celebrate its 10th anniversary. That remarkable longevity has, at the very least, a wonderful double payoff. First, the players among themselves have an easy trust and camaraderie; they know each other's moves; they coalesce each other's strengths and the signals to their music-making have been internalized, almost instinctualized (if that is a word). Second, they've built a core audience with a very similar trust and willingness to support and follow WCMS's lead in music that explores composition beyond the traditional canon.

Those payoffs were strikingly evident in Saturday night's performance at the Worcester Historical Museum — itself a perfect venue for chamber music; its deep rose walls, historical portraits, and stained-glass panels celebrating the mechanical arts somehow intimately conveyed the essence of the Worcester experience.

The program began with three songs composed by John Corigliano in 1988, scored, strangely, for flute and solo voice to “explore the poetic side” of Irish music. As always WCMS's flutist and executive director Tracy Kraus handled her assignments with crisp suavity and facility, including some striking riffs in the first song, William Butler Yeats's poem “Down by the Salley Gardens,” and haunting openings and closings of the second and third songs, “The Foggy Dew” and Padraic Collum's “She Moved Through the Fair.” Contralto Emily Marvosh has a sparkling persona and a lush, powerful tone entirely adequate to the near coloratura passages. But this reviewer had trouble sorting out the lyrics and following the narrative thread. Even sans some of the text the interplay of voice and flute was arresting.

The second piece, “Rising,” by Joan Tower, perhaps the best known woman composer in America (she's still a professor of composition at Bard College), featured Kraus joined by the standard WCMS string quartet: Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), Rohan Gregory (violin), Peter Sulski (viola), David Russell (cello). The composition is well named and has resonances not only with Samuel Barber's famous Adagio but more significantly from Beethoven's late quartets. Tower's work in its intense spiraling and surprising dynamics seems to have transcended, indeed thrown away, conventional forms and expectations. It's a devilishly difficult and ambitious work, escalating toward what might be considered a kind of flute cadenza toward what Tower's called musical “... upward motions ... through different filters, packages of time and varying degrees of heat environments which interact with competing static and downward motions.” The audience enthusiastically responded.

The next piece of the program was Eric Korngold's Sextet in D Major, written when he was 19 years old and unsoiled by emigration to the U.S. The usual music histories love to portray Korngold as a Vienna-born, Bohemian genius brought low by the vulgarity of Hollywood film composition. It didn't help that Korngold inscribed his impressive score for “The Adventures of Robin Hood” “To Jack Warner with deepest thanks for selling me — and saving me!” Someone ought to write a more nuanced account of the movies and music, centered on a comparison of Korngold and Shostakovich as victims of survival musical instincts within savage national cultures.

Anyway, Korngold, like Mozart and Mendelssohn, early on penned works of amazing maturity and depth. His Sextet required commitment and dexterity from WCMS's quartet, supplemented by Ariana Falk (cello) and Marcus Thompson (viola). They all locked into the score ferociously, opening with lovely melodies, spinning through fierce semi fugues, splendid cello solos, neatly syncopated efforts in the Intermezzo third movement, and majestic fusion of sound for the melodic torrents of the Finale. The audience roared approval.

There was a dessert break and then Buckland Reisner, Sulski, Gregory and Thompson (all on violins) romped through Telemann's Concerto for Four Violins in G. Major. There was some confusion whether this music was meant as munching accompaniment or solemn concertizing. With maximum élan and flourish the violinists soared through Telemann's rollicking score, but the eating, standing, listening precluded the standard ovation the WCMS so richly deserved.