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Article published Sep 27, 2010

Bravura night for Russian intricacies MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

Worcester Chamber Music Society kicked off this season with a fifth anniversary concert titled “The Russian Spirit” at the First Baptist Church’s Gordon Hall Saturday night. The program was complex, challenging, and, as befits its title, featured open-artery emotional bleeding on that particularly Russian continuum — tragic sobbing on one end, wise-guy spoofing on the other.

The spoofing started things off: Alfred Schnittke’s polystyle sendup “Moz-Art for two violins” in a splendidly hammy rendering by Peter Sulski (a WCMS founder) and Rohan Gregory.

In sync or in opposition, Sulski and Gregory gyrated and mugged their way through Schnittke’s deliberate blend of “light” and classical composition. At one point, Sulski plucked backup for Gregory’s whistling. One loyal fan of WCMS who had heard the two play the same music some months earlier at Anna Maria College said he thought Rohan’s whistling was stronger in the summer. The audience laughed tentatively at the antics, never quite sure, (as, apparently, were Soviet bureaucrats) of what it all meant.

It seems longing for Mother Russia and conflict-estrangement from Russia’s governments is the lifeblood of Russian creativity. Emotional exile was a theme threading the four composers on WCMS’s program: Schnittke moved to Hamburg after the Soviet collapse; Rachmaninoff to America and Switzerland and was buried, against his wishes in, appropriately enough, Valhalla, N.Y.; Alexander Tcherepnin to Chicago; and Tchaikovsky in anguished separation every- and anywhere.

Right after Schnittke’s spoof came Rachmaninoff’s “Trio elergiaque,” the 20-year-old’s tragic meditation on Tchaikovsky’s sudden death — his mentor and idol. Alternately soaring and moaning, the piece hands off and trades around beguiling melody after beguiling melody among the piano, Ian Watson with characteristic energetic, absolute command of the material; violin, played, as always, with crystalline clarity and fervency by Krista Reisner; and cello, delivered with surpassing tonality by David Russell. WCMS continues to find cellists of amazing technical competence. The dazzling stalwartness of their playing made sweet the overly long and hyperbolic thrust of the music.

After the intermission, the program came up for light air with Tcherepnin’s spritely and ingratiating trio for flute (Tracy Kraus), violin (Sulski) and cello (Joshua Gordon). It was, perhaps, the most Americanized music of the evening, and delivered with predictable WCMS fluency and professionalism.

It served as a hors d’oeuvre for the final main course: a ravishing, furious rendering of Tchaikovsky’s electric “Souvenir de Florence.”

Originally scored for a string orchestra WCMS took it on, astonishingly, as a sextet: Reisner and Gregory violins; Sulski and Scott Woolweaver, violas; and Gordon and Russell, cellos. The result was marvelously convincing. No spoof, no sob, this was the real Russian musical deal.

The sextet came together in an arresting performance, fusing the melodic mega-rushes into a thrilling conclusion that caused the audience instantly to offer a standing ovation.

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