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Worcester Chamber Music Society up to the challenge

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In the six years the Worcester Chamber Music Society has been in existence, it has gifted Worcester audiences with excellent performances and creative programming. However, little has been said about its informal and informative pre-concert talks given by members of the group.

These chats add to the pleasure of each performance by providing the audience with background knowledge about the composers and, in the case of Saturday's performance at First Baptist Church, a map through a challenging program. The performance titled "Remembrances of Things Past" refers to the remembrances of the three composers represented and how they were influenced by composers who preceded them.

The music of two seldom heard composers, Max Reger and Alfred Schnittke, comprised the first half of the program. Reger, if he is known at all, is probably recognized for some of his more than 200 organ works. But Saturday we were given the opportunity to hear his Serenade for Flute, Violin and Viola, opus 141a, which was the first offering on the WCMS program.

Reger was a scholar of Baroque polyphony, particularly that of J. S. Bach, and this tightly crafted work reflected that familiarity. The first movement was gay, sprightly and delicate, followed by a lyrical Larghetto and then a rollicking Presto finale. Though it meandered close to atonality, the Serenade was readily accessible on a first hearing and was a delightful piece we wished we had heard before.

Schnittke's String Trio was another story. It asked much from its listeners because of the composer's penchant for mining the techniques, styles and timbres of many different eras and combining them in new and unusual ways. He called this technique polystylism and it provided a wild ride for the audience.

The Trio is in two movements, and hearing it was a bit like walking through a maze. Just as you thought you had lost your way entirely, a shift in mood or style allowed you to find the path again and continue through the piece. There were many such rapid shifts and changes throughout, but thanks to the clues given in the pre-concert talk, all ended well.

The intensity of the writing and of the playing of the three performers was compelling, and the exquisite use of dynamics and the many different sound effects made the piece very interesting. The audience listened intently, and, judging from reactions heard during intermission, many would like to hear it again.

After intermission we were treated to a performance of the String Sextet #1, opus 18 by Brahms. Back in familiar territory we could bask in the rich, romantic sounds, soaring melodies and classical forms that characterize Brahms' music.

The recognizable sonata-allegro form of the first movement with its lush sounds and beautiful melodies was followed by an Andante in Theme and Variation form. The Scherzo was folk-like in character and reminiscent of Brahms' Hungarian Dances, and the Finale was an enchanting Rondo.

During this performance it was a treat to hear the music of a favorite like Brahms. But it was equally wonderful to hear new and unusual music, which can expand the mind and broaden our knowledge.

Once again the Worcester Chamber Music Society provided an exciting and unusual concert, and a grateful and appreciative audience gave them a prolonged standing ovation.

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