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Festival a gift for Chamber fans

By John Zeugner TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

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Serious chamber music fans in Central Massachusetts deserve a mid-summer treat and get one, courtesy of Worcester Chamber Music Society's Music Festival at Anna Maria College in Paxton. Tuesday night was the kick-off faculty concert of the music camp that runs through next week. Another faculty concert occurs today, and also July 19 and 21 — all at 8 p.m. in Miriam Hall, a gracious, high-ceilinged room with clear acoustics, gorgeous sunsets through high, narrow windows and flowing 30-foot drapes.

Last Tuesday's concert juxtaposed Bach and Shostakovich — two geniuses whose work has supremely transcended petty commentators' mathematical/numerological speculation in the case of Bach, or Cold War psychologizing concerning Shostakovich. As the Soviet era fades into Russian history more and more it seems Shostakovich deserves equivalency with the peerless Bach.

WCMS's lead violin Krista Buckland Reisner opened the program with Bach's Partita in E Major for solo violin, BWV 1006. As always, Reisner brought a dazzling fluency to her playing, taking the opening Preludio at a sizzling pace only to yield to meltingly conveyed dynamics in the second piece, Loure, energetic bounce in the Gavote, good belting in the Bouree, and sinewy delight in the final Gigue. Veteran concertgoer Tom Keil — a cellist in the Festival camp — remarked, "Fantastic music, fantastically played."

There followed another Bach piece, the Trio Sonata in C minor from "The Musical Offering" BWV 1079. In his "pre-concert conversation," WCMS pianist Ian Watson wittily recounted how Bach came to write his celebrated "Musical Offering" for Emperor Frederick II, meeting the monarch's demand for six parts on a theme he provided.

The Trio Sonata falls in the center of the piece and calls for Flute, violin, cello and harpsichord. WCMS violin faculty Amy Rawstron and Rohan Gregory took up the challenge with Rohan playing a transposition of the flute part, and Watson at the keyboard and Joshua Gordon, cello.

The group brought a surprisingly lush emotionalism to this baroque masterwork, with Gordon in particular supplying an arresting melodic tone to the cello parts.

But the great payoff occurred after the intermission with the second half devoted entirely to Shostakovich's Piano Quintet in g-minor, Op. 57, surely one of the greatest piano quintets ever penned. WCMS faculty, Reisner and Gregory violins, Peter Sulski, viola, Gordon, cello, and Watson, piano, brought astonishing bite and emotional wallop to the piece. Watson, the gentle harpsichordist for Bach, turned thunderous nail-gun

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maniac for Shostakovich, snapping out the thunderous chords at the outset and meticulously detonating the upper register runs, establishing a near-crazed focus that enveloped the other instruments as they joined in. The group played with an intensity that simply paled even the old Beaux Art Quartet's version with Menahem Pressler, rendered mannered and languid even the excerpts with the young Glenn Gould, available on YouTube.

Here was Shostakovich as he must have envisioned the piece: snarling, furious, and liltily captivating. By the end of this concert, it seemed the audience experienced the astonished amazement and unsettling fear once felt by a German emperor and a Russian tyrant at their court musicians' compositions.

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