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All-Beethoven concert enthralls MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

In music-making the fusion of setting and sound isn't everything, but place surely makes a difference. Music in Worcester is blessed with two venues that acoustically and visually give enormous heft and inspiration to performance: Mechanics Hall for almost any kind of music and, for chamber music, the chapel at Assumption College.

That well-named Chapel of the Holy Spirit puts gorgeous darkly golden wooden gothic arches over three segments of pews, north, south, and east of a slightly elevated altar area that served as a platform for Worcester Chamber Music Society Saturday night.

And by the end of that all-Beethoven concert one awesome spirit controlling the place was named Ian Watson, a pianist whose talent, whether celestial or satanic, is other worldly in its technical flawlessness, delicate nuance and grasp of the early Beethoven's playful genius.

Watson's rendering of Beethoven's errantly designated Piano Concerto Number 1, was stunning — clearly delighting and mesmerizing the audience. He tossed off complicated runs with casual yet meticulous fluency, and his phrasing was always deftly and convincingly shaped.

As a finale to the first movement he opted for Beethoven's briefest and most appropriate cadenza, and throughout the concerto he pulled his eleven string accompanists into sweet alignment with his understanding of Beethoven's purposes. Of course the audience gave him a resounding standing ovation.

There were at least three other gifted spirits in the chapel before Watson took the stage.

Tracy Kraus (flute), Krista Buckland Reisner (violin) and Mark Berger (viola) wonderfully executed Beethoven's irrepressibly sunny "Serenade, Opus 25." Throughout the seven movements the trio traded off and around melodies with terrific sonic and bodily dynamics. Krauss' flute work was always elegant, pungent, masterful — a lovely meshing commentary on the vigor and beguiling string work of Reisner and Berger. Especially in the fourth movement, "Andante con Variazioni," the trio reached a fused intonation that magically embodied both the charm and tension of Beethoven's composition.

The opening Trio and the closing Concerto formed ravishingly light and warm bookends around the program's very risky middle selection, Beethoven's anguished, angry, haunted "Grosse Fuge, Op. 133." Originally composed as the finale for Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 130 in B-flat Major, the movement developed a life of its own, including versions for a string orchestra adopted by WCMS.

The problem from a musical programming point of view is that it's like saying "In the morning let's awaken your son with doughnuts and hot cider, and tonight let's take him to Baskin Robbins, but at noon let's see what death does to him."

In the late string quartets Beethoven achieved a new musical consciousness, a sublime transcendence that seems to belong solely on its own, not sandwiched between two lovely frolics.

Also, and not incidentally, the piece is supremely difficult, a ferocious test of four string players made exponentially more difficult when six more are added. Problematic tonality difficulties were occasionally offset by the energy and conviction of the players. The result was not satisfying, but surely WCMS gets kudos for daring.

Withal, the chapel's glistening wooden vaults provided a superb enclosure for WCMS' splendid music-making.

