

WCMS masters an all-ages concert

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Posted at 12:12 PM

Updated at 12:12 PM

Worcester Chamber Music Society's concert Saturday night in the spanking new Shapiro Hall at the Joy of Music School pitted the work of two teenage composers against America's John Harbison, who turned 79 this year. The program opened with Alberto Ginastera's "Impresiones de la Puna," penned when he was 18 years old, in 1934, and scored for flute (Tracy Kraus), two violins (Krista Buckland Reisner and guest artist Lilit Hartunian) viola (Peter Sulski) and cello (Joshua Gordon). As always Kraus's flute work was glistening and captivating, in a complex opening solo, and in the second and third movements, easily floating above the lovely, lyrical string accompaniment. The piece was slender and evocative, a nice lead-in to Harbison's Piano Quintet, written when he was 43 years old.

The program notes included a statement from Harbison: "The final elegy is, I trust, the only direct reference to difficult circumstances under which the piece was composed, reflecting in its open-ended form the unresolved questions it poses at every turn."

In fact, a certain sense of loss and sadness extends back into the movements before the final elegy. The piece is complex and arresting with a steady under-throb of heartfelt distancing. There are lyrical moments in the five movements, particularly piano ripples that suggest hope, but the tone is one of loss, reaching a pinnacle in the final "Elegia."

The two violinists, Katherine Winterstein and Rohan Gregory, the violist, Mark Berger, the cellist, David Russell, and particularly the pianist Randall Hodgkinson seemed attuned to Harbison's effort, achieving a remarkable coherence across the myriad dynamics of Harbison's sound and rhythm. Harbison's Quintet deserves study and rehearsals.

As Rohan Gregory noted in his pre-concert, talk Harbison's work can hold its own among the great piano quintets by Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Shostakovich. Could Harbison be the adult in Shapiro Hall, Saturday night?

After the intermission one more teenager weighed into the competition. At the ripe age of 11, Felix Mendelssohn started writing string symphonies. And after tossing off 13 of those he turned his 16-year-old attention to what he considered a more elaborate symphonic effort, his Octet for strings. The result has thrilled audiences ever since.

The WCMS string players, plus guests Winterstein and Hartunian, tackled the Octet with exuberance, tenacity and fierce focus. In that dedication and energy they lost, for this reviewer at least, the essential lightness and prancing subtlety of Mendelssohn's astonishing charm. The musicians charged into the score; the attacks had sweat and precision, as well as an overwrought aggression — all snarl and no sweet.

But Mendelssohn's sister Fanny once wrote of the ethereal scherzo of the Octet: "... the trills passing away with the quickness of lightning; everything new and strange, and at the same time insinuating and pleasing, one feels so near the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession. At the end the first violin takes a flight with a feather-like lightness — and all has vanished."

Her words apply to all of Mendelssohn's music. This reviewer missed such insinuating and pleasing lightness in WCMS' supercharged rendition of the Octet. The Shapiro Hall audience, however, loved the exuberant playing and stood cheering WCMS' mastery.



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