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## Female composers score in WCMS concert

If Valentine's Day is a celebration of a love's continuum, Worcester Chamber Music Society's Saturday night concert in Assumption College's chapel clearly handed victory to the female side. Yes, compositionally it was two vibrant female talents, Marti Epstein and Amy Beach, versus two paunchy white guys, Camille Saint-Saens and Johannes Brahms. The ladies carried the night.

Contemporary Epstein was on hand to introduce her work, "Nachtvoll for flute, viola and harp," written in homage to her mentor, Hans Werner Henze, with distant reference to Igor Stravinsky. Tracy Kraus (flute), Mark Berger (viola) and Franziska Huhn (harp) struggled to impose traditional musical coherence on the sparks Epstein sent out. You could almost feel the audience's hunger after periodic bursts of sweet melody among the rhythmic collisions against tunefulness. But incrementally Epstein took listeners to a place they'd never been — a mesmerism of near holy sound as individual and "made up" as her title word "Nachtvoll." One felt in the initially puzzled and then escalating applause that she'd caught and dazzled audience attention.

The standard and tiresome rap on Amy Beach is that if she'd been born male she would have outshone Chopin, Liszt, maybe even Mozart; her gender never let her into the game. But if she lost the opening rounds, her compositions have commandingly gained momentum. And the ever-growing recordings of her work surely place her with Barber and Copeland and Gershwin among America's most gifted composers. With typical insouciance WCMS offered Beach's seldom heard "Theme and Variations for flute and string quartet." Kraus and WCMS's regulars, Krista Buckland Reisner, Rohan Gregory (violins), Peter Sulski (viola) and Joshua Gordon (cello) rendered Beach's lush melodies with captivating radiance. At first in these variations the flute seems to periodically spear through the canopy of quartet sound, but eventually by the final Largo and Allegro giocoso, Beach integrates all instruments in a fugue of ethereal beauty.

A beauty that seemed several notches higher in the celestial order than Saint-Saens' "Fantaisie for violin and harp," that immediately preceded it, almost as if Beach were showing her predecessor how his tired prose could be made poetry.

Kraus and Buckland Eisner played the Saint-Saens with impressive finesse and authority, but the subsequent Beach music pushed his compositional efforts onto very distant shores.

That left the Brahms Quintet, and after intermission, the regular WCMS quartet supplemented by Mark Berger (viola) vigorously performed what Gregory in pre-concert remarks called "the sunny but still sad" side of Brahms. After a very shaky opening bars, WCMS settled into its wondrous affinity for his chamber music. The final Allegro magically fused energy and conviction, but for this reviewer at least, the memory of Epstein and Beach eclipsed full appreciation of Brahms' work. Their compositions had a tantalizing and overwhelming presence, rendering everything else pale.

In a further ironic victory it seemed the female performers outshone their male compatriots. Buckland Reisner and Kraus left a deeper imprint as did guest artist Franziska Huhn, whose harp work evidenced meticulous individuation while simultaneously generating a smothering flow of gorgeous beauty — a dazzling trick indeed.