

Worcester Chamber Music Society illuminates with ‘Night Music’

By Jonathan Blumhofer / Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

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The Worcester Chamber Music Society returned to action Sunday afternoon at Assumption College’s Curtis Hall. The program was called “Night Music” — especially fitting, given the end of Daylight Saving Time, the start of the season’s early evenings, and the concert beginning just as darkness fell — and featured nocturnal-themed works by Arthur Foote, Franz Schubert, Luigi Boccherini and Arnold Schoenberg.

Foote’s “A Night Piece,” a 10-minute-long essay for flute and strings, opened the proceedings. It’s a lovely score, one that alternates flowing, lyrical melodies between, primarily, solo flute and violin. Sunday’s reading was highlighted by a slivery, graceful account of the former part from WCMS flautist Tracy Kraus and a well-blended, warmly rocking rendition of Foote’s accompanimental string writing.

Lush, dusky textures in the outer sections of Schubert’s E-flat-major “Notturmo,” which followed, framed passionate outbursts in its central part. Violinist Krista Buckland Reiser and cellist Rhonda Rider proved a finely matched string duo, playing with unanimity of articulation and thoughtful balances, while Randall Hodgkinson turned in a rhythmically keen realization of the keyboard part.

The “Notturmo” was further marked by fluent tempos and a strong sense of dramatic shape, qualities that also defined the WCMS’s presentation of the night’s biggest piece, Schoenberg’s “Verklärte Nacht” (“Transfigured Night”). Written in 1899 and inspired by a poem by Richard Dehmel, it’s a work that can easily get lost in its own, richly chromatic thickets.

That didn't happen on Sunday, though, thanks to a combination of factors. Playing the original string sextet version of "Verklärte Nacht," the WCMS brought an urgency to its performance that was palpable from the pulsing, opening figures. Add to this a close attention to musical shape, tempos that moved smartly, a focus on textural transparency, and a strong sense of character, and Sunday's reading was about as lively and intense as one could hope for.

If it didn't quite overcome the music's late-Romantic verbosity, well, that wasn't the fault of the WCMS strings, whose account of the concluding bars shimmered.

Despite its half-hour duration and iconic status, "Verklärte Nacht" didn't end up as the concert's most striking piece. That distinction belonged to Boccherini's "Night Music of the Streets of Madrid."

A musical portrait of the eponymous scene, Boccherini's 1780 score is theatrically bracing (with ensemble members entering and exiting the stage while playing), replete with contrasts (of texture, melody and mood), and brimming with personality. It's also fairly free in its treatment of dissonance, at least for the time period.

On Sunday, the WCMS played "Night Music" with rousing enthusiasm. Violinists Buckland Reiser and Rohan Gregory dug into Boccherini's vivid imitations of drumming (which included taut bow strokes and, in response, Gregory enthusiastically knocking out rhythms on the back of his fiddle). The pair also engaged in animated exchanges of bravura displays in the fifth-movement "Passa Calle" (its recurring theme was made famous some years back in the soundtrack to the film "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World").

Later on, Gregory and violist Mark Berger exchanged their string instruments for, respectively, castanets and tambourine in the final "Ritirata," while Buckland Reiser's fourth-movement duets with cellist Rider soared.