

The Catskill Chronicle

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WCM's Chaos, Color and Contrast- Concert # 2

By Barry Plaxen

In the late afternoon on July 17, Weekend of Chamber Music ((WCM) served music lovers a “Tea Time Concert” at the Eddie Adams Farm in Jeffersonville. Once again, Artistic Director, Judith Pearce, created a unique program of musical works chosen for the 2010 Summer Music Festival’s theme, “Chaos, Color and Contrast.” From the moment the program started, somehow the audience knew it was in for another superb concert that would be fascinating and stimulating, to say the least. But for some it ended up also being very uplifting and enlightening.

Though I was familiar with all of the music to be played, I was not prepared for the power of the in-person performance which began with composer-musicologist Andrew Waggoner delivering a lively, informative and entertaining pre-concert talk on minor intervals that permeated the music we were about to hear, and on understanding how those sounds create chaos, contrast and color, thereby enabling us to enjoy those specific sounds whenever they appeared in the concert by letting them fill our ears, and hence go directly to our emotions without any fear of the idea of hearing dissonance.

After the wonderfully-not-too-long talk, the music began with one masterpiece following another. Manuel de Falla’s (1876-1946) “Fantasia Baetica” for solo piano, his “Concerto for Harpsichord,” Bela Bartok’s (1881-1945) “Contrasts” and the surprise work of the program, Jean-Fery Rebel’s (1666-1747) “Le Chaos.” Another example of Pearce’s extraordinary programming inventiveness.

As the stage door to the auditorium opened, pianist Tannis Gibson, a familiar face and familiar pair of hands to WCM enthusiasts, strode out dressed in a “cool” red top and a black and flared Spanish skirt, perfect for the occasion, offering up a somewhat informal and fun aura for which to begin playing one of the most difficult pieces in the piano repertoire and lightening up the concert – lightening in two ways: continuing the informality Waggoner started, and by the pyrotechnics of her wonderfully heavy percussive keyboard attacks for de Falla’s wonderfully percussive and ambitious Flamenco-based piece, composed for Arthur Rubenstein who was enamored of de Falla’s “Ritual Fire Dance.” Baetica is the old Roman name for Andalusia, and the music pointed



out the blending of the contrasts, if you will, of Flamenco rhythms and sounds with 20th Century classical sounds.

Contrast came about again as Pearce joined Gibson for four selections from Haydn's non-masterpiece, "Pieces for Mechanical Clocks." This music from the classical period (my favorite period) seemed to me to be too tame after the variety of sounds and rhythms I had just heard, and I would guess that was Pearce's intention; to contrast the simple (Haydn) with the complex (de Falla).

And it was the complex that followed. Onto the stage to join Gibson marched Pavel Vinnitsky, new to WCM, with two clarinets and another WCM favorite, Sunghae Anna Lim, with two violins!! They were to perform Bartok's "Contrasts," a piece written for famed violinist Joseph Szigeti and Benny Goodman, who both performed and recorded it with Bartok at the piano. I am familiar with that recording and others, but I was not prepared for hearing *and seeing* this true masterpiece played live by these three remarkable WCM world class musicians.

Though titled "Contrasts," the work aurally and visually depicted "colors." You could see the violinist using every virtuoso technical skill, bowing and plucking single notes and chords, and making use of the second violin which is tuned differently so that you can play dissonant sounds on open strings with no fingering, while the clarinet speed-plays scales, arpeggios, trills, and more, creating sound textures that permeated throughout my entire body. This live experience was a thrill for me and I will never forget it. (Not having asked about the two clarinets, perhaps the fingering for speed-playing was easier if different clarinets were used. Anyone aware of why the two clarinets were used is welcome to add a comment below.)



Then onward to what many musicologists, including Kenneth Hamrick, call de Falla's greatest work, "Concerto for Harpsichord." It was composed for Wanda Landowska who did not keep it in her repertory after its initial performances. It is a real Spanish work, and again de Falla uses classical forms to heighten the Spanish sounds and rhythms. The work is an ensemble piece, and was brilliantly and voluptuously performed by all, Hamrick on harpsichord, flute (Pearce) oboe (Matt Sullivan), clarinet (Vinnitsky), violin (Lim) and cello (Caroline Stinson).

And then "backward" to the beginnings of dissonance in the mid-eighteenth century, with the surprise piece of the evening, Jean-Fery Rebel's "Le Chaos" and Dances from the ballet "Les Elemens," which begins with a chord so dissonant that, as Hamrick explained, it caused a riot amongst the listeners, similar to the "Rite of Spring" riots in Paris in the early 20th century. Of course, the music is baroque, and the dissonances resolve themselves, but what a joy to hear a "kind" of music one never heard before. This is not the kind of simple dissonance Scarlatti used to make the harpsichord sound louder. This is more complicated, i.e. with all the notes of the chord sounded at once to depict chaos and harmonic confusion. "Les Elemens" includes musical depictions of water, fire, air, etc., and all ended with that sound of "happily ever after" – Consonance!!

Again, the entire ensemble played with great skill and musicality. I had a bit of a problem hearing the piano and harpsichord due to the placement of the eight performers in that particular venue, but in no way did it deter me from appreciating the new sounds as they wafted over, in and through me, again so brilliantly and wondrously played by all the WCM musicians.

And, I was not the only person in attendance who had a very peculiar reaction to all the music of the day. Perhaps a peculiar “result” is what I mean. I, and others I spoke with, were amazed at how many strangers we all spoke to at intermission and after the concert, spurred on by the desire to express our joy about what we had just heard. And I think it was because we were very enlightened by the talks and the music and by our new awareness of the use of heavily dissonant sounds which we now understand to a greater degree and so can now appreciate their “beauty” even more than before.

The 3rd and 4th concerts of the Festival will take place on Thursday, July 22 in North Branch and Saturday, July 24 in Jeffersonville. www.WCMconcerts.org.