

Rockport Chamber Music Festival Has It All

New Director, Gorgeous Hall, World Class Players

John W Ehrlich

This once almost secret Boston North Shore music festival has come a long way since its 2010 move into its world-class hall, dramatically perched on the shore of Sandy Bay in downtown Rockport, Massachusetts. With the opening of the Shalin Liu Performance Center, Rockport has become a must-visit destination for music lovers. It was instructive to hear the variety of languages spoken in the foyer at intermission. This 330-seat gem of a hall now regularly sells out. If the three concerts I heard represent the general level of performances, it's easy to see why.

The notable 20-year tenure of David Deveau as the festival's artistic director came to a close last season. As he was about to step down, Deveau mused, "The one thing all are agreed about is that the classical programming at Rockport Music, both for the festival and during the winter season, should be done by an artist, whether performer or composer, an artist who can walk the walk, and perform or compose at a very high level and serve as the artistic 'face' of the operation."

Judging from this season, the festival found an ideal successor: violinist, violist, and arts administrator Barry Shiffman, a co-founder of the St Lawrence String Quartet and a director of several programs at the Banff Centre, including the triennial String Quartet Competition. Shiffman's programming and energy have already greatly expanded the festival's outreach. He's also begun programs to nurture and mentor young performers.

In the first concert I heard this year with Canadian violinist James Ehnes and American pianist Andrew Armstrong they performed four Beethoven violin sonatas: Nos. 3, 5 (*Spring*), 8, and 10. Complete command, eloquence, and creative intelligence were all evident in Ehnes's

playing; and Armstrong was his perfect accompanist. I was particularly struck with the arc of Beethoven's maturing mastery from the early Sonata No. 3 (1798) to the last (1812).

The Brentano Quartet has a long history at this festival. Since its debut in Rockport in 1998, they have become an essential ensemble. This was abundantly evident in a superb program of Mozart, Respighi, Webern, Schubert, and Schoenberg. Mozart's Quartet No. 16 was notable for its deliberate tempos that revealed inner details often lost at a quicker pace. The slow movement especially benefited from this approach, its innate chromaticism italicized to an almost shocking effect.

Dawn Upshaw then came on stage to sing *Il Tramonto* by Ottorino Respighi, a rich setting of "The Sunset" by Shelley. I've always felt that because Respighi's Roman Trilogy is so rich and fragrant his other music is unfairly ignored. Yet when one discovers such smaller gems such as *Laud to the Nativity* and *Il Tramonto*, one is struck by the elegant craftsmanship of their intimate sound. Shelley's poem begins in the giddy world of first love discovered and savored. As time passes, that giddiness gives way to sorrow and numbness at the loss of a lover. Respighi's music also runs the gamut from initial joy to profound despair. Upshaw sang the work handsomely, with exquisite attention to language nuances and vocal color.

The concert's second half opened with an ineffective experiment. The Brentano Quartet decided to interweave Anton Webern's spare, sublime *Bagatelles* with some early minuets by Schubert. The plan was to discover parallels between two Viennese composers. It just didn't work, and both composers suffered. I found the Schubert distracting and even a bit commonplace when played between Webern's exquisite miniatures. I longed to hear the Webern unencumbered by these distractions. The Brentano played with complete assurance and virtuosic panache—perhaps the finest traversal of Webern's unearthly music I've heard.

The concert then went on to its apex with a magisterial reading of Arnold Schoenberg's remarkable Quartet No. 2. Its music quite tellingly reflects its composer's reluctance to let go of tonality and turn to the world of serialism and atonality. It is an intensely musical work, rife with wonderful melody and impulsive rhythm. Many performances veer into sheer virtuosity and fanatical attention to perfect intonation at the expense of presenting a

coherent and musical performance. The Brentano and Upshaw gave us a perfect amalgam of all of that. I've never heard a more persuasive performance of this remarkable score.

It was notable to watch Upshaw's face as she listened to the first two movements. She was clearly very impressed with what she was hearing. Stephan George's poetry is sung in the quartet's final two movements. She seemed more comfortable singing this music than the Respighi. The last movement begins with the soprano wondering, "I feel the air of alien planets," the perfect presage of the music that was very soon to flow from Schoenberg and the entire New Viennese school. This was truly top-drawer music-making.

Last year's Van Cliburn Competition winner, South Korean pianist Yekwon Sunwoo, offered a recital of three solo works on his concert's first half. The Shalin Liu Performance Center has a huge glass window behind its stage which allows artists playing there a choice of leaving a grand view of Rockport's Sandy Bay as background to their performance or closing some decorative acoustic shutters forming a more traditional backdrop. After Sunwoo came on stage, he told the audience that he not only preferred the sunset view but would also change the order of his program to take advantage of it. Instead of beginning with Schubert, he chose to perform Percy Grainger's ornately colored, rippling 'Ramble on the Last Love Duet from *Der Rosenkavalier*'; the music was a wonderful match to the seascape behind the pianist. All this would have been mere showmanship had not Sunwoo the musicianship, technique, touch, and grace to make this Liszt-like take on Strauss's opulent music his finest performance of the evening.

Schubert's Impromptu, Opus 142:3 followed, a serviceable performance without the extraordinary nuance and preternatural singing line that Sunwoo had brought to the Grainger. To be fair, the two pieces could not have been more different from one another, yet somehow the spell had been broken. The recital's first half closed with a barn-burner, *La Valse*. While Sunwoo's was never daunted by the many virtuosic demands, he was notably short on conveying the atmosphere. Despite impressive technique, I was not emotionally moved.

On the second half he did a reprise with the Brentanos of Dvorak's Piano Quintet No. 2, a work they played together at the Cliburn (see S/O 2017). One of the chamber repertoire's most optimistic works, it soared, sang, and danced as it should.

18 Music in Concert

The Demon Lives

Botstein Excels in Taneyev

Don O'Connor

The summer's central composer at Bard's SummerScape in Annandale-on-Hudson NY was Rimsky-Korsakoff, and the related opera was *The Demon* by his slightly older Russian contemporary Anton Rubinstein, performed July 27 to August 5 at the Sosnoff Theater. It is based on a Lermontov poem, and the title character is a fallen angel who hopes to win the love of the Georgian princess Tamara, even killing her fiancé, Prince Sinodal, in an ambush to further his aim. Heartbroken, she retreats to a convent, but the Demon finds her and pleads for her love. She dies as they finally kiss. The Demon, having lost what he most desired, flees, cursing in despair. Redeemed, Tamara's spirit is borne heavenward by the other angels.

The work is nearly standard rep in Russia but is rarely done elsewhere. The program booklet had an informative essay as to why this is so, but that may be changing. There's currently a Barcelona production that will wind up in Moscow in 2021.

Although Rubinstein was taken to task by Cesar Cui as "not a Russian composer, but merely a Russian who composes", much of the opera's music—the choruses especially—sounds quite Russian. One of the Demon's themes from Act III eventually wound up in the prelude to Moussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*. Also, *Demon*'s music has some of Rubinstein's faults—he wrote too much and too quickly. Act III, for example, has a lengthy love duet with little harmonic tension till its very end. Yet, if far from a great opera, it has enough drama and character to hold our attention.

The performance was a good one. Efim Zavalny in the title role sang and acted well. It's an odd part. The Demon has to spend lots of time just glowering, but Zavalny fleshed it out admirably. Nadezhda Babintseva as the Angel who must resist the Demon's wiles sang well but with a broad vibrato. (The Barcelona production used a countertenor for that part.) Olga Tolkmitt was good as Tamara, her voice really opening out in Act II, where it needs to. Even lying down

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