



Music fest presents works by mentor, protege

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

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Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival probed the fruitful teacher/student relationship between Antonin Dvorak and Josef Suk Tuesday evening.

COTUIT – Bringing a taste of Romantic Bohemia to the Cotuit Center for the Arts, the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival probed the fruitful teacher/student relationship between Antonin Dvorak and Josef Suk Tuesday evening.

Dvorak you know. Suk, not so much – but he knew Dvorak. From his teacher, mentor, inspiration and eventual father-in-law, Suk learned to appreciate and capitalize on the compelling rhythms of the Czech and Slavic folk vernacular.

The result? Not reworked tunes, but lush classical lyricism, driven by the hardy beats of rustic traditions.

Pianist and festival artistic co-director Jon Nakamatsu was joined by an all-star cast of musicians for the performance: violinist Adam Barnett-Hart of the Escher Quartet; cellist Daniel McDonough of the Jupiter Quartet; violist Rebecca Young, associate principal of the New York Philharmonic; and well-known pianist Susan Grace.

Sometimes pairings, even between distinguished musicians, fail to click. On this evening, the collaboration was musically astute, and intensely interesting.

It would be hard to underestimate the importance of Dvorak's four-hand "Slavonic Dances" to the composer's career. Dvorak had found an appreciator in Brahms, and the elder composer's publisher had asked Dvorak for some piano music, in the style of Brahms's own "Hungarian Dances."

Dvorak's creation, which eventually became two sets of "Slavonic Dances" – quickly transcribed into an orchestral version – was an enormous success. It sold out of music stores (remember, back then people bought the printed score for home enjoyment), and cemented Dvorak's reputation.

The settings mix accessible charm with challenging fingerings. Nakamatsu and Grace – Grace sitting on the treble side of the piano – tackled three from the first set (Op. 46). Like all of the music this evening, the pieces layered beckoning melodies over peasant rhythms.

Each of the three dances had the melody firmly in the upper hands, with rich harmonies and counterpoint filling in underneath. A middle mazurka – triple meter, with strong accents on the later beats – was a highlight.

Nakamatsu was joined by Barnett-Hart and McDonough for Dvorak's noble "Dumky" trio. Among the most unusual and appealing chamber works in all of the repertory, the "Dumky" alternates brooding, introspective sections with cheerful outbursts – sometimes without transition or warning.

Dvorak avoided tradition sonata form in creating the trio, instead writing six movements, most of which not only alternated Dumka moods, but also explored major and minor in the same key.

The opening *lento* (starting in the home key, E minor, then shifting to E major), set the tone. A second movement juxtaposed a slow melody in the strings with gorgeous piano strumming.

A third movement (A major and minor) continued the trend, the tempos shifting from thoughtful to wild, the melody skipping from keyboard to strings and back. The players were attentive to each other, taking advantage of expressive possibilities.

By the time they reached the final movement (C minor and major), a dark figure – on the lowest violin strings, deeply realized by Barnett-Hart – seemed to encapsulate the entire work.

Matching the expressive skills of his mentor must have been a lifelong challenge for Suk. His own piano quartet, (labeled Op. 1, in A minor), bears the same emotionally wrought, rhythmic and gestural energy that his mentor's best music does. Young joined Barnett-Hart and McDonough, with Grace at the keyboard, for this work.

The quartet may not be able to escape Dvorak's influential shadow, but it has depth and sophisticated writing for all four players. Grace especially proved an alert collaborator, at times playing as if she were accompanying vocalists – filling the spaces with unobtrusive invention.

The 37th Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival continues through Aug. 25 at various venues throughout the Cape.

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