



Falmouth program blends safe with ambitious

Monday

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Seems best when music ensembles stick to their strengths. But then stretch their limits as well.

By Keith Powers Contributing writer

FALMOUTH – Seems best when music ensembles stick to their strengths. But then stretch their limits as well.

With symphonies by Haydn and Mendelssohn, and a piano concerto by Chopin, the Falmouth Chamber Players Orchestra both stayed in its comfort zone, and created some challenges for itself as well. The program was appropriate and ambitious at the same time.

Music director John Yankee led the ensemble, with pianist Stephanie Weaver joining the orchestra for Chopin's F minor concerto, at the John Wesley United Methodist Church in Falmouth Sunday afternoon.

Haydn's "Alleluia" symphony (No. 30, in C), so-called because of a Gregorian chant Alleluia invoked in the opening movement, stays simple, clinging predominantly to its home key. A middle movement anchored by a solo flute line (nicely articulated by Lorrie Hassan), shifts to G major to favor that instrument. But the symphony remains for the most part uncomplicated – a great deal of unison playing in all the string sections. A stately minuet in the finale lends a bit of rhythmic insistence.

Yankee let his winds and horns take over for Donizetti's brief but spirited "Sinfonia for Winds." Of course, the oboes and flutes had the most prominent melodic lines, but a gentle bassoon figure helped color the harmonies, and the playing was alert and energetic.

He may have been the greatest composer ever for piano (we can fight about it), but Chopin's two concertos do not get performed nearly enough. Both youthful works, the concertos only hint at his genius.

His F minor has many beautiful attributes, and Weaver brought nearly all of them to light in this reading.

The first movement stays around for a long time – an extended opening by the orchestra leads to a straightforward development of easy themes. But the middle movement is a thing of beauty. It has an A-B-A outline, with identical lyric sections surrounding an interesting interior section, highlighted by tremolo strings.

As a listener, sometimes all you want is a repeat. Weaver sketched out the slow A section gorgeously, and when it came back a second time, the pleasure was renewed. It was beautifully played, the soloist showing a light touch and a lyrical sense.

The final movement, with many more ensemble colors and challenges, shifted the focus to the orchestra. It's a mazurka – the triple-time Polish form that Chopin made his own. Some parts proved chaotic: a rhythmically diverse col legno section for the strings – bouncing the wood of the bows on the strings – got a bit unhinged. The energetic coda set things to rights.

After intermission, Yankee led the orchestra in Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony – so called for the composer's intent to celebrate Protestantism. Mendelssohn did so with quotes from the Dresden Amen in the first movement – a spacious, rising scale – and in the finale, which relies almost entirely on the well-known Lutheran hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Distinct evidence of Bach's harmonies and counterpoint also invoke Mendelssohn's programmatic intent.

Yankee got many good phrases from the ensemble. Sometimes shaky intonation, and a less-than-unified string sound, weakened the articulation, but the playing overall had healthy enthusiasm.

The next Falmouth Chamber Players Orchestra performance will be the ensemble's Spring Musicales on May 21. Information: falmouthchamberplayers.org or 508-274-2632.

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