



Trio provides strong start for chamber music festival

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

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The Mile-End Trio may be recently formed, but they played like they had been together for ages Tuesday evening.

COTUIT – The Mile-End Trio may be recently formed, but they played like they had been together for ages Tuesday evening.

The trio – Jeff Multer, violin; Julian Schwarz, cello; and Marika Bournaki, piano – opened this summer’s Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival at the Cotuit Center for the Arts with a substantial program of works by Beethoven, Brahms and Paul Schoenfield.

Make no mistake, the piano trio repertory is hard. Coupled with the inherent challenges of balancing a loud percussive instrument – the piano – with more delicately sounding strings, composers seemed to thrive on increasing the challenges with stormy, virtuosic music.

Beethoven’s Op. 1, No. 1 trio (the numbers make it seem like an early work; it’s not) began the program. The driving, extended opening movement, built on a repeatedly shared triplet figure, brought murmurs of appreciation from the audience.

A gorgeous melody highlights the succeeding slow movement, broadening an expansive atmosphere that characterizes the entire work. The scherzo had its ups and downs – some intonations got wobbly, and Bournaki might have misplaced a few fingerings coming out of the middle trio section.

But the playing was constantly focused, alert to the challenges and lively to the musical possibilities.

Paul Schoenfield's popular "Café Music" has worked its way into the standard piano trio repertory. Written in 1988, inspired by Schoenfield's stint as a lounge pianist, the composer has blended sounds from the music he used to entertain partiers into a quilt of energetic styles.

Reference points abound. Some part of this entertaining piece is certain to recall bits of your musical past. A show tune. A cartoon soundtrack. A late-night jazzbo, or klezmer from a bar mitzvah.

Schoenfield's layering of the styles – coupled with his almost haughty way of ignoring boundaries – makes this good music. A straight jazz lick might run headlong into a comedic slide down the piano keyboard (Bournaki made the most out of this demanding, shifting piano part).

Schwarz often took the role of stand-up bass, anchoring the bottom not with repetitive figures, but with a wandering, tuneful rhythmic line. Multer stepped out with hot guitar imitations, or folksy references.

Few if any movements in the chamber music literature are marked "Rubato," like the middle section of "Café Music." But Schoenfield demands that the players take liberties with the melody for expressive purposes, and he got it. Bournaki's long piano introduction, and Schwarz's impressive response, came off like quasi-improvised layouts in a club trio.

Brahms makes sense. Whether he's treating listeners to delicate melodies, or repeatedly stretching the boundaries of musical propriety with unusual chord after unusual chord, his music never seems to be anything but organic and integrated.

His first piano trio, in B major, is a noble addition to the repertory, and the trio explored it beautifully to bring this program to a close.

Each of the four movements creates its own world. The opening stormed out, then reversed gears in a mellow tranquillo section. The scherzo balanced its staccato opening and closing with a glimmering middle section that felt like Italian sunshine.

The slow movement was the greater among equals. Bournaki worked her way slowly, in chorale-like fashion, through breathtaking chords, all different, exploring every aspect of the home key, and some aspects that barely belonged there. The string players answered – with questioning phrases. The effect: the alteration of strained emotions, some noble and sad, some exploratory, all unexpected.

The finale climaxed with a racing energy, bringing the concert to a heart-pounding conclusion.

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

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