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Cape symphony spreads its wings to Nth Degree

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By Keith Powers/Contributing Writer

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Expect anything at a chamber music concert. Then you might be ready for Nth Degree.

The Cape Symphony Orchestra's chamber players, directed by concertmaster Jae Cosmos Lee, staged three startling late-20th century works from American composers Saturday evening at Falmouth Academy.

Dances? You bet — elegant and stylized. Whale imitations? Yep. Playing the piano with chisels and paper clips? Of course. Bird sounds? Sure. Players wearing black masks? That, too.

Works for three different trio formations filled the program: "Variations" by John Harbison, "Café Music" by Paul Schoenfield and "Vox Balaenae" by George Crumb.

Harbison's "Variations" started with a dance inspiration — the composer seeing a statue of a dancing fertility goddess — but ended up far away from that vision. In an adventurous series of variations on a canon, Harbison sets his trio — Lee on violin, clarinetist Mark Miller and pianist Steven Beck — through sixteen brief movements, sometimes pairing groups, sometimes setting solos apart, and sometimes engaging the trio as a unit.

The playing was superb. "Variations" falls loosely



DAN CUTRONA/COURTESY OF CAPE SYMPHONY

Nth Degree chamber music ensemble performed Saturday in Falmouth and Sunday in Chatham. Cape Symphony musicians, from left, Jae Cosmos Lee, series director; Zachary Sheets on flute; and Mark Miller on clarinet, were among the players.



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Nth Degree chamber music ensemble performed Saturday in Falmouth and Sunday in Chatham. Cape Symphony

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musicians, from left, Jae Cosmos Lee, series director; Zachary Sheets on flute; and Mark Miller on clarinet, were among the players.

Nth Degree next performs March 12 in Falmouth and March 13 in Chatham, presenting works of Dohnányi, Dvorak and Schoenberg.

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There were many individual highlights. Lee double-stopping over simple piano chord (7th movement), juxtaposing the complex and the simple. The beautiful piano figure (9th movement) over intermittent accompaniment. And each of the final movements, the musical ideas moving further and further away from the original, the playing smartly articulating these changes.

Schoenfield's "Café Music" is a popular concert work and fit beautifully into this program. Accessible and fun, based on jazzy, ragtime notions with a stride feel in the piano, the work, as Lee said before starting in, sounds like something Disney could create animation for.

The middle section stands out. With two very different moods, the opening rubato does just that — Beck toying inventively with the melody in his right hand at the piano, the left-hand rhythm simple and unwavering. But the transition in the middle of a movement — to a gorgeous cello (Guy Fishman) melody, harmonized by the violin — makes this work more than just a playful romp.

Perhaps no American composer of the late 20th century had a greater sense of dramatic purpose than George Crumb. His "Vox Balaenae" ("Voice of the Whale") — set for amplified piano, flute and re-tuned cello — filled the second half of the program.

Crumb had early recordings of whale songs — deep, rumbling communications that carry miles across the ocean bottom — in mind when he wrote the work in 1971. An introduction and nocturnal conclusion flank a set of six majestic variations, the real core of the work. Harmonics cluster from each of the instruments, building a continuous, sensuous texture that is as deep as the sea.

The players wear black masks, creating a sense of anonymity. The composer asks for deep blue lights onstage. Extended techniques are demanded of everyone: the pianist plucks and strums the inside of the piano, the flutist (Zachary Sheets) sings through his instrument, the cellist whistles.

Often these extra-musical tricks detract from the whole, but "Vox Balaenae" is a perfect unit from beginning to end, its entrancing mood never wavering. The playing was alert and engaged.

The sense of theater, initially created by the lighting and the masked performers, was integrated into the entire work, right down to the last note — actually not a note at all, but a feigned gesture ending in silence, the pianist and cellist looking at each other for the moment of attack, and then faking a sound.

This work is not for amateurs. None of this challenging, well-conceived program was. The playing matched a sense of adventure with virtuosic skill, a tribute to Lee's sense of what good chamber music performances can be.

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into three main sections: the first, moderately tempoed, develops ideas on the initial canon, a rising and falling melody sketched out in the violin and clarinet. The middle section has variations at a brisker tempo, the playing far more virtuosic. The final set of movements — a waltz, fughetta, passacaglia and aria among them — take a different approach, the original melody buried deeply in the changing textures.

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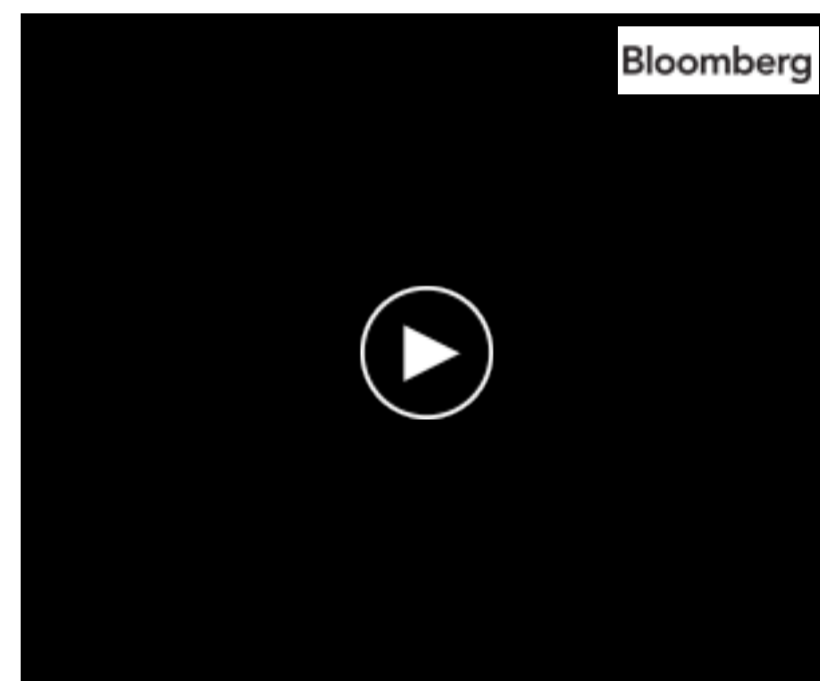
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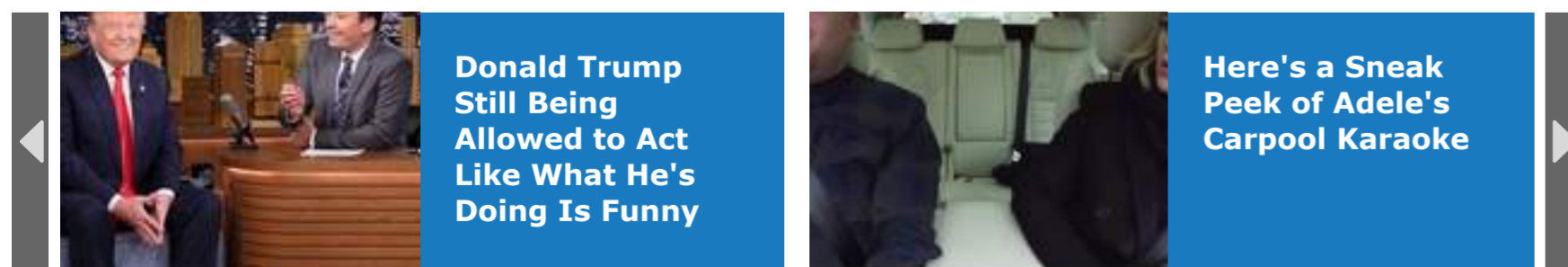
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