

Clarinet, violin standouts in Nth Degree opener

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By Keith Powers Contributing writer

FALMOUTH — Two quite obscure works, and a greatest hit from 1799, kicked off Nth Degree’s third season opener Friday evening at Falmouth Academy.

The Cape Symphony chamber ensemble, thoughtfully curated by CSO concertmaster Jae Cosmos Lee, played chamber settings by Prokofiev and Ravel, both composed in the 1920s, and Beethoven’s great septet serenade, his Op. 20 in E-flat.

Prokofiev’s quintet would be a complete stumper on Guess that Composer. It was written during the Russian’s sojourn in France — where, as Lee pointed out, the music of his fellow ex-pat Stravinsky ruled the day. Prokofiev’s score, originally a chamber ballet, wends its way through six movements for oboe (Elizabeth Mitnik Doriss), viola (Peter Sulski), double bass (Nathan Varga), clarinet (Mark Miller), and violin (Lee).

Anyone’s first guess would probably be Satie—the music sounds like his antic “Parade.” Or Anteil, in his Dada “Ballet Mécanique.” Varèse perhaps. It’s quirky, with jazz influences in there somewhere, challenging pitches and exotic allusions. The opening melody, carved out by Doriss, sounds vaguely Turkish.

The craziness gets interrupted by a kind of “What was that?” movement in the middle. Marked Adagio pesante (slow, weighty), the dreary sound (again Doriss leads the way) slogs through the quintet. Good times are quickly restored with the pizzicato Allegro precipitato, beautifully played, and the enthusiastic finale.

Been to Madagascar? Didn't think so. Neither had Ravel, but that didn't stop him from composing his affecting "Chansons madécasses." Three art songs composed for voice (in this setting, baritone Bradford Gleim), flute and piccolo (Sarah Brady), cello (Jacques Lee Wood), and piano (Marc Ryser), the songs rang widely.

One is a love song. Another, with its howling "Aoua" opening, a protest song against oppressive whites. The third, a curiously sketched-out melody about another oppressor — the brutal heat in Madagascar. Ravel took the poems from a collection by Evariste-Désiré de Parny — now, is that some name for a poet or what?

Gleim sang in great character, his French idiomatic and accessible even without printed lyrics. His voice, naturally lyric, had good chamber volume, and his ease of delivery allowed everyone to relax into the unusual nature of Ravel's settings.

Musically, a challenging cello solo from Wood stood out — the introduction to the opening love ballad. The setting of "Aoua" — angry, otherworldly and ominous — worked its way lugubriously in some minor key through its threatening lyrics.

After intermission, Lee programmed Beethoven's famous septet. It calls for unusual instrumentation: three strings — violin (Lee), viola (Sulski) and cello (Wood) on one side; winds — clarinet (Miller), French horn (Clark Matthews) and bassoon (Hazel Malcolmson) opposing; and bass (Varga) in the middle for support.

This Septet is still popular now, but not as popular as it was back in Beethoven's day, when the Serenade form — six movements, a couple of dance sections mixed in, and some virtuoso parts for fun — was the rage.

Miller and Lee led the way, creating sonic counterpoint between expressive clarinet and the higher pitched violin. Matthews and Malcolmson had moments to stand out, but the predominant solo work came from Lee and Miller. The finale, with its little march and short violin cadenza, was particularly well turned.

The next Nth Degree program will be Jan. 27 in Falmouth and Jan. 28 in Chatham, featuring quartets by Debussy, Stravinsky and Shostakovich. For tickets and information visit capesymphony.org or call 508-362-1111.

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