

SouthCoast Chamber Music Series delivers a beautiful sadness

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

Posted Mar 15, 2018 at 3:01 AM

An absolute bummer. No more appropriate compliment could be given to the South Coast Chamber Music Series program Saturday afternoon at St. Gabriel's Church in Marion.

It was the music — certainly not the playing. A minor key trio from Haydn, and Bartók's final, dour string quartet filled the first half. Dvorak's Op. 81 quintet altered the mood only somewhat, veering rashly between happy and sad.

The program was a continuation of the revitalization of SCCMS under artistic director and pianist Janice Weber. She was joined in this performance by violinists Piotr Buczek and EmmaLee Holmes-Hicks, cellist Timothy Roberts, and violist Don Krishnaswami.

The mood started out grim, and stayed there. Even the normally effervescent Haydn, whose charm and wit have propelled hundreds of works, wrote this trio in the forlorn key of F-sharp minor. The piece still shows all of the composer's inventiveness in gesture, and elevates a bit with a major key slow movement. But its overall feeling is sadness.

Weber hinted at some of the origins of the composer's feelings in a pre-performance chat — unhappy marriage, the end of a tryst, and of a sojourn in London — but the message is really in the music. A proportionate sonata-form first movement brings two themes, carved out beautifully in the piano. The middle, slow movement sounds like a dream — all three players (Weber joined here by Buczek and Roberts) with atmospheres to explore.

But it's really the finale — a minuet, in the fashion of the times. Shaped like a scherzo, with outer sections repeating and a middle trio of a sharply different texture, it sounds like a dance, but moves with a heavy weight. A coda snaps everyone out of the downcast mood, briefly.

Bartók's final quartet brought everyone right back. There can be no doubt of the composer's intentions: each of the four movements is marked to be played "Mesto" (Sadly).

The "Mesto" comes from a short introduction, repeated for each of the movements. Only briefly presented in the first three, the introduction takes over the final movement completely, as if the composer had been warring against it all along, and finally had to give in.

All of Bartók's six quartets are dense, but the last one has an accessibility unlike the others. Challenging phrases abound — both for players (Holmes-Hicks joined the strings for this piece) and listeners. But many of those difficult phrases are repeated, or recast slightly, and the quartet sits more easily in the ear than the others.

Many moments stood out in this bravura performance. A burlesque-type third movement, with one of the violins (Buczek) tuned flat to emphasize the misshapen nature of the section, was played with emphatic attention. A pizzicato middle trio in that movement — all four string players plucking — helped create a stark atmosphere.

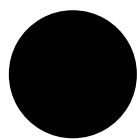
Dvorak's expansive piano quintet in A major filled the second half of the program. Both audiences and players gravitate to the composer's rich catalog of chamber music: for audiences, the melodies come frequently and memorably. For players, everyone gets engaged, nearly continuously.

Like many of Dvorak's chamber works, this quintet has a Dumky section — based on a folk idea, where the music shifts without pause or transition from happy moods to dejected ones. In this quintet, it comes in the second movement, anchored by an A section that recurs three memorable times, but is interrupted by alternate ideas and key signatures.

The quintet has riveting ups and downs, and its conclusion — almost prayerful, with single notes in the piano, and a kind of chorale in the strings, before it leaps headlong into the coda — finally brought listeners into a happy place.

The music may have been largely tragic, but this performance was anything but. SCCMS has continually provided engaging, well rounded programs under this artistic direction.

The next concerts, April 14 and 15, feature music of Ornstein, Arensky, Barber and Medtner. For tickets and information visit www.nbsymphony.org or call 508-999-6276.



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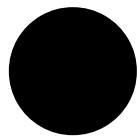
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