

Chamber Music Series highlights the timelessness of Beethoven

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

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Timeless things give us the most hope.

Take Beethoven. We are two centuries removed from the composition of his music, yet his early period seems ageless, his middle period both stately and vigorous, and music from his late period still can sound inscrutable and heart-rending at the same time.

When we feel beset by violence, and the belligerent atmosphere that pervades almost every aspect of society, his restless inventiveness still surprises us and takes us to a grander place.

The South Coast Chamber Music Series presented music from the three periods of Beethoven's compositional life Saturday afternoon at St. Gabriel's Church in Marion.

The concert is being repeated today at 4 p.m. at St. Peter's Church, 351 Elm Street, South Dartmouth.

A relatively early violin sonata ("Spring"), a middle era cello sonata (Op. 69, No. 3), and a late quartet, the A minor, Op. 132. It was a performance with peaks and valleys, but one thing stayed constant: the dramatic, infectious pull of the music.

The program not only offered examples from the three distinct compositional periods, but also examples of how Beethoven still dominates entire genres of music. The 10 violin sonatas reach the summit for musicians attacking those duos; the five cello sonatas may not be as supreme, but are easily the greatest set of any composer's.

The string quartets? A great argument (Bartok, Shostakovich), but Beethoven's 16 still stand apart from any others in breadth and energy.

Violinist Piotr Buczek sat in with SCCMS artistic director Janice Weber for the "Spring" sonata, with its familiar melodies (frequently co-opted, as Weber put it, "for movies and elevators"). An easy first theme — the source of the sonata's nickname — gets followed by a fussier second theme. They get developed and explored together, with the generous opening melody usually winning out.

The expressive slow movement is deepest Beethoven, and the brief scherzo skitters excitedly. The rondo finale does not test the listener, as some of Beethoven's music can.

The playing was alert, but some passages felt unhinged — not altogether phrased with accuracy, with too much reading, and not enough interaction between the players.

Cellist Timothy Roberts joined Weber for the A major cello sonata. Weber reduced the piano lid to a short stick, helping greatly with the volume balance. She led the way, first through the long and challenging first movement, then the scherzo, with its off-the-beat accents, and the fleet finale. Some string passages were muddied by inexact intonation.

A guest appearance by New Bedford Symphony Orchestra's principal second violinist, EmmaLee Holmes-Hicks, who joined Buczek, Roberts and violist Donald Krishnaswami for the Op. 132 quartet after intermission, proved the musical highlight of the program. Holmes-Hicks sat first chair.

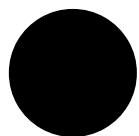
Any appraisal of this long quartet, which pivots around its passionate middle movement (there are five), falls short of its impact. The central movement, written in thanks for Beethoven's recovery from serious intestinal illness, has the composer storming the gates of paradise with a hymn-like chorale.

Three times it appears in the movement, each time raised in emotional intensity and pathos.

But the outer movements also have their moments of invention. In both opening movements, contrasting alternately lend either a rocking lull or a bumpy anxiety to the music. The final two movements — a brief, out-of-character march, leading right into a presto finale — whisk the listener away from the intensity of the reverential third movement.

Holmes-Hicks played with confident, pure tone. It was a pleasure to hear her away from an orchestra section, in the intimacy of a chamber program. Krishnaswami as always made his viola solo lines sing with precision.

The South Coast Chamber Music Series resumes Jan. 13 (Marion) and 14 (South Dartmouth) with Ritmos Caliente, music of Latin America, featuring guitarist Aaron Larget-Caplan as guest artist. For tickets and information visit www.nbsymphony.org or call 508-999-6276.



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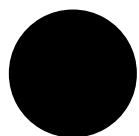
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