

Monday, February 12, 2018

## East Coast Chamber Orchestra brings works for strings to IVCI Laureate Series



Besides presenting a couple of the 20th-century masterpieces for string orchestra Sunday afternoon, the **East Coast Chamber Orchestra (ECCO)** added the local premiere of **Derek Bermel's** "Murmurations" and a well-worn showpiece for founding member Susie Park, a Laureate in the 2002 **International Violin Competition of Indianapolis**.

The IVCI Laureate Series concert at the **Indiana History Center** showed off the 17-year-old conductorless orchestra, a cohesive group despite regular changes of distinguished young personnel, in Bartok's Divertimento and Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony in C minor, op. 110a.

Of the Hungarian composer's works of serious mien, Divertimento is the most genial. Despite the acerbic quality of the first-movement melodies, in the opening movement cheerfulness keeps breaking in. ECCO's performance of it honored that buoyant quality. The dour second movement had the ensemble switching gears decisively. The orchestra's command of such a broad emotional spectrum was displayed consistently in its unanimity of attack and the alert coordination of dynamics. Accents were firm and well-distributed. The folding in of soloistic elements, particularly evident in the concerto-grosso-like finale, was smooth, playful, and almost teasing.

The Shostakovich is a much-performed version of the Russian composer's eighth string quartet, an autobiographical work that's well served by the spaciousness of Rudolf Barshai's arrangement. The intensity of so much of the music attains an extra dimension when it's played by a chamber orchestra of this caliber. What can seem like overstatement when the piece is tackled by just four players moves toward simple grandeur. The occasional solos were haunting, and the stunning force of the full ensemble, given such textural variety by the 17 players, made the work's three Largo movements easier to digest.

Park was featured in Pablo de Sarasate brief character showpiece, *Zigeunerweisen* (Gypsy Airs), op. 20 No. 1. In the suspenseful introduction, a few leaps were not quite on target, but the soloist gave lots of character and precision to a soft, fast staccato passage and the swooning glissandos that follow. The ensuing *Allegro molto vivace* is what sets folks' pulses racing, however, and Park and her colleagues found the right pace and spirit of abandon. Everything moved with sparkle, the left-hand pizzicatos were well-defined, and the rush to the final bar had the right feeling of freedom and impetuosity.

The Bermel premiere here came in the ECCO schedule in between Philadelphia and New York first performances of the piece, whose title denotes a flock of starlings. The movement titles had slight discrepancies in the program, but each designates a place where the composer observed the birds. The dreamy second movement had too much sugary lullaby about it, though it caught the gliding motion of the title well.

The first movement of "Murmurations" offered a charming introduction to Bermel's concept; without specifically seeing a flock before our eyes, we could sense in this music that kind of mysterious communication that conveys the very idea of "flock" to human eyes. Our earthbound forms of collective action seem much clumsier in comparison.

The finale, titled "Swarming Rome," emphasized rapid fluttering and the tug of collective movement in a context drawn from the minimalist aesthetic. The whole collection of patterns swept upward into a final outburst that drew delighted gasps from the audience. The age-old dream of flight had come alive in a new way.

- Jay Harvey Upstage

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