

Viola mishap apart, North Shore Chamber Fest ends in style with Mozart

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By Tim Sawyer



Vadim Gluzman and Paul Neubauer performed Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante Saturday night at the North Shore Chamber Music Festival with David Danzmayr conducting.

The 2017 installment of the North Shore Chamber Music Festival (NSCMF) came to a close Saturday night with a mostly Mozart program at Northbrook's Village Presbyterian Church. For this year's finale the NSCMF featured an orchestra for the first time, hosting the Columbus-based ProMusica Chamber Orchestra under its music director David Danzmayr.

The evening opened with an accomplished reading of Mozart's Rondo for Violin and Orchestra in C Major, K. 373 with rising local violin star Joshua Brown as soloist. Brown is the third annual honoree of the Arkady Fomin Scholarship Fund, an award granted each year through a "non-competitive process...by an anonymous advisory board" to a young artist who embodies the philosophy of the fund's eponymous late violin pedagogue.

Whatever the procedure used to select a winner, it clearly worked in Brown's case, as his lithe playing betrays a musical maturity beyond his 17 years. A student of Almita and Roland Vamos, the young man played with great poise and a silken tone on his 1679 Guarneri (which he possesses as the youngest recipient of an instrument from the Stradivari Society of Chicago), and is clearly someone to watch in years to come.

Danzmayr and the ProMusica players took center stage with Mozart's Symphony No.

29 in A Major, K. 201. From the breathless opening bars the ensemble's robust, unified string timbre was most impressive, and Danzmayr's leadership was tastefully unobtrusive. The Austrian gently emphasized contrapuntal lines and active inner voices, which lent extra vitality to the opening Allegro moderato.

ProMusica's reading of the Andante had abundant Mozartean grace. Danzmayr and colleagues kept the buoyant dotted rhythms of the Menuetto light on their feet and the spirited finale went with élan, receiving a hearty ovation after the double bar.

After intermission came the evening's lone non-Mozart offering: Vilém Tauský's *Coventry: A Meditation for Strings*. Tauský was a Czech Jew who fled Nazism for the United Kingdom and volunteered as a rescue worker in Coventry following its repeated bombing by the German Air Force and destruction of the town's famous cathedral. Tauský's *Coventry* is a reflection of the composer's firsthand experience of that devastation.

The work is a somber, ten-minute threnody, which undulates between grief-stricken depths and rage-filled peaks. Much of the work feels like desolate wandering, compellingly evoking its composer's experience of wartime ravages. A particularly effective passage features lurching gestures from a solo quartet of first desk players alternating with ethereal major chords, suggesting terrestrial and celestial realms. Danzmayr and friends gave *Coventry* a well-balanced, ardent reading.

To close the festival, artistic director and violinist Vadim Gluzman and violist Paul Neubauer were the solo protagonists in Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat Major, K. 364. Neubauer elected to perform the work with Mozart's originally indicated scordatura tuning, in which the solo viola's strings are tuned up a half step while he plays down a half step in D Major, so his part comes out the same (in E-flat) but with a more vibrant timbre.

The opening Allegro maestoso had an apt regal quality, with both soloists dynamically in sync. As Neubauer had suggested in remarks before the work, the soloists eschewed Mozart's written cadenza to this movement in favor of one based on a 1920's recording by British violinist Albert Sammons and violist Lionel Tertis. While Neubauer pointed to the cadenzas Eugène Ysaÿe and Frederick Stock wrote for K. 364 as precedent for abandoning Mozart's original, this did not make the one heard Saturday night any less dubious. Awash in double stops and anti-Mozartean harmonic forays, while inventive in spots, the cadenza was out of step with the movement as a whole both in idiom and scale.

Both soloists produced ennobled playing in the achingly beautiful Andante. Sadly, the spell of this wistful movement was broken about halfway through when the bridge of Neubauer's viola snapped off—a function of the greater stress playing scordatura puts on an instrument—forcing the performance to stop.

Neubauer ultimately took the ProMusica principal's viola (she in turn taking the last seat player's instrument) to finish the performance. Neubauer got hearty laughs from the audience stating authoritatively, "We will start at the beginning of the first movement," before the musicians recommenced two bars before where they had stopped. The sunny Presto finale was effervescent, the two soloists highlighting the ingenious interplay of the score, with Danzmayr and ProMusica providing refined, simpatico support throughout.