

PCMF Notches Quarter Century



Jennifer Elowitz remembers
25 years at PCMF.

This summer marks the 25th anniversary of the Portland Chamber Music Festival and the final season for its founding Artistic Director, violinist Jennifer Elowitz. Having missed the first week of the two-week four-concert series, we got on board for Thursday night's third installment at the festival's usual venue of Hannaford Hall at the University of Southern Maine, where the programming intelligence that has animated the series from its inception manifested itself most satisfyingly.

The players first offered something of a rarity in the context of a general-purpose chamber concert, a Bach cantata, specifically no. 32 (1726), *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen*, for soprano (Tony Arnold), baritone (Alexander Hurd), oboe

(Peggy Pearson), solo violin (Gabriela Diaz), and ensemble/continuo (David McCarroll, violin; Jonathan Bagg, viola; Andrew Mark, cello; and Michael Beattie, harpsichord). Bach set a text by Georg Christian Lehms inspired by the passage from Luke's gospel depicting the young Jesus who, having absented himself from his family for three days, was discovered discoursing learnedly in the temple. Lehms, however, abstracted this story into a broader parable about loss, searching, and consoling welcome, in which one character (the soprano in Bach's setting) is a lost soul and the other is Jesus providing assurance and, finally the welcome into the communion of lost souls who have found him. Bach structures the first five movements (the finale is the obligatory chorale, in this case by a different author) ingeniously so that the first three (soprano aria, baritone recitative, baritone aria) are for one or the other soloist, the fourth is a dialogue arioso, and the fifth is a very flashy and operatic aria for both together. He also assigns to each vocalist a distinct accompanying instrumental soloist, the oboe for the soprano, the violin for the baritone, each instrument providing a corona of delicate filigree tracery.

In an evening of pretty much all exemplary performers, Arnold was a knockout. Her limpid and intonationally impeccable line matched perfectly to Pearson's fluid elegance. She also communicated as a consummate actress, progressing from insecure pleading and fear to confidence and wholeness. Hurd couldn't quite live up to that standard, on either front, but he conveyed Jesus' inviting and consoling words with warmth and authoritative assurance. Diaz, like Pearson, warbled sweetly yet firmly, particularly in the strangely folk-like solo aria. The ensemble behind the soloists extended a discreet yet noticeably resonant and emotive underpinning. The concluding chorale, the chaste *Mein Gott, öffne mir die Pforten*" by Paul Gerhardt, set an existing tune by Louis Bourgeois familiar to pianists in the two settings by Robert Schumann in his



The concert's forepart concluded with *Paganiniana* a new work by David Ludwig, which was on the second stop of its premiere tour, having been co-commissioned by PCMF and three other festivals. Ludwig, who introduced it from the stage, has made a name for himself with some strikingly affective pieces (see our take on one from two years ago [here](#)), and this one, a virtuoso showpiece (you doubtless guessed that from its name); he bills it as a concerto for violin (McCarroll) and chamber ensemble (Laura Gilbert, flute; Todd Palmer, clarinet; Elowitch, violin; Brant Taylor, cello; Diane Walsh, piano; and Robert Schulz, percussion). The idea was to take Paganini's famous 24 Caprices, distill them into their technical and gestural essences, apply these to a contemporary sound world, while retaining the charm and magic (and sometimes the notes) of the originals. It is organized into one movement of three fairly distinct sections corresponding to a standard concerto. We didn't attempt to dig deeper into its formal structure, partly because we were entranced and frankly awed by the brilliance with which McCarroll nailed both its prodigious technical requirements and the channeling of the charisma and ferocity of Paganini's rock-star persona. Of the many felicities in this piece, the use of piano and percussion to spur the obsessive propulsion of the writing, even through the slower central section, especially impressed. Unlike a lot of other composers, Ludwig has a good sense of how a piece should end. In this case, the end must needs deal with the final caprice, one of the most famous and protean tunes, which has generated variation sets not only by Paganini but by Schumann, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Lutosławski, and who knows how many others. Here, Ludwig wittily provides the lightest, wispiest acknowledgment, enough to let you recognize it, and then zips to the end. We loved it. We hope McCarroll and this fine ensemble can record it.

Like Beethoven, Brahms was leery of committing to a string quartet early in his career. Beethoven had worried about the long shadow of Haydn, and Brahms bore the added ghosts of Mozart and Beethoven. In the pool of works for strings alone, Brahms put a tentative toe in with the Sextet, op. 18 in B-flat Major, for paired violins, violas and cellos. This succeeded well enough that he followed it with another, op. 36, before finally turning out two publication-worthy quartets in op. 51). Meanwhile, both his sextets have charmed and beguiled audiences ever since. For the PCMF closer, Diaz and Elowitch, violins; Carol Rodland and Melissa Reardon, violas; and Taylor and Mark, cellos, essayed the B-flat entry.

The key to getting these sextets right is to counter the tendency for the lower average pitch of the instruments to clot the texture. It isn't easy, and we're sorry to report that in the amiable opening movement it didn't quite happen. The sound was rich and mellow as you'd like, in a pretty relaxed tempo, and while Diaz and Elowitch played sweetly, they didn't soar. The more somber and austere Hungarian-sounding theme and variations second movement, though, was a treat. It's the first violist's movement, and Rodland played-out impassioned and plangent. The second variation, with its gruff, accented chords dissolving into weeping sobs, was a standout for the whole ensemble. Rodland took another star turn in variation 4, which, as well as the subsequent variation, both in the major, show Brahms developing his influential "character variation" technique. In the brief scherzo, here more relaxed than frolicsome, the ensemble enjoyed baffling the listener with Brahms's famous "find the downbeat" rhythmic complexity. The rondo finale ought to evoke Mozart with a light touch, but the slowish tempo applied here worked against that. The story is that Joachim, to whom Brahms often turned for advice on string writing, urged the composer to rewrite the finale with episodes having greater contrast to the theme. Brahms rejected this on the grounds that it would destroy the unity he

wanted. Again it falls to the performers to maximize the variety of sounds, and here again we found things sagging a bit. Against that, though, the rhythmically pointed second episode delighted us. So, mark this down as a partial success.

Vance R. Koven studied music at Queens College and New England Conservatory, and law at Harvard. A composer and practicing attorney, he was for many years the chairman of Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble.



LEAVE A COMMENT

All Rights Reserved | View Desktop Version