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PCMF Torch Passes



Melissa Reardon, the new titulaire.

The Portland Chamber Music Festival brought its 25th season to a close on Saturday with music new and old, and with due ceremony that acknowledged both that milestone and the passing of the torch from its founder to a new generation of leadership.

Portland native Jennifer Elowitch, then an active Boston freelance violinist,

started PCMF both to fill a perceived gap in the cultural affairs of her native city and to reaffirm her links there. Not only has she succeeded on both fronts, but also, her imaginative programming and ability to attract top performers from all over the country to a two-week, four-program engagement in August, has made PCMF a highly respected destination for audiences and talent, including the numerous composers who have written for and worked with the ensembles. Having developed PCMF to such a high point of achievement and public awareness (it also sponsors a few concerts and events during the cold months), and having accepted a year or so ago the position of Director of Music at the Walnut Hill School of the Arts in Natick, Elowitch decided that the quarter-century mark was a good one on which to transition PCMF to new leadership. As it happens, the new Artistic Director (she officially takes the reins on September 1st), violist Melissa Reardon, is also associated with Walnut Hill. In a further confluence of events, both Elowitch and Reardon performed, in their days at New England Conservatory, with its Youth Orchestra under Benjamin Zander. After the closer, in which both women performed, the audience came to its feet in extended and noisy gratitude for past glories and expectation of those to come. There was also a concert.

It began with a most unusual item, the cantata (or song cycle) *A Forest Unfolding*, commissioned by Electric Earth and premiered in Peterborough, NH on August 12th. It falls into a long but rarely employed tradition of multiple-composer works—one thinks, for example, of the *F-A-E Sonata* by Schumann, Brahms and Albert Dietrich, and *Hexameron* by Liszt, Czerny, Herz, Pixis, and Thalberg; this writer has also participated in one such musical “exquisite corpse.” In its nine sections, *A Forest Unfolding* employs the talents of four composers unequally. Melissa Wagner, probably the most familiar name among them, and Eric Moe each contributed one section, while David Kirkland Garner,

who teaches at the University of South Carolina, wrote four and Stephen Jaffe, who teaches at Duke, wrote three. Novelist Richard Powers supplied overarching concept as a reflection on the relation of humanity to trees, based on recent (and controversial) scholarship—its instigator was a German forester named Peter Wohlleben, but a body of work has arisen in corroboration—claiming that trees in a forest communicate with each other, even between species, using a subterranean network of fungal fibers. A committee comprising Powers and fellow novelist Kim Stanley Robinson, plus environmentalists Bill McKibben and Joan Maloof, selected poems and other writings that spoke to the relationship of humans and trees (or nature generally), with an agenda to move from alienation and objectification to reverence and, well, oneness. The committee then approached the composers to set these pieces, and the composers then collaborated among themselves, sharing ideas and coming up with a musical motif to link the movements, namely (and somewhat obscurely) the final movement, *Der Abschied*, from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. The texts, in order, were W.S. Merwin's *Native Trees* (set by Moe), part of God's speech from the whirlwind from the Book of Job (in Stephen Mitchell's magnificent metric translation; set by Garner), Anna LaBastille's *Woodswoman Etude* (Garner), Merwin's *Trees* (Jaffe), a passage from Thoreau's *Notebooks* (Garner), Wendell Berry's *In a Country Once Forested* (Wagner), and Powers's *Eternal Song* (Garner).

Powers introduced the piece and narrated Job, Notebooks and Eternal Song; soprano Tony Arnold sang Native Trees, narrated Woodswoman Etude, and joined with Baritone Alexander Hurd in In a Country Once Forested and, in vocalise, in Eternal Song. Hurd had the solo part in Trees. Movements 3 and 8, both by Jaffe, were instrumental interludes; the extended Pierrot ensemble (who also accompanied the vocalists) consisted of Laura Gilbert, flute; Todd Palmer,

clarinet; Gabriela Diaz, violin, Jonathan Bagg, viola, Andrew Mark, cello, and Diane Walsh, piano. They were all, as were the singers, effective and communicative. We note in particular Arnold's jagged harshness in *Native Trees*, Palmer's nice rocking figures in the barcarolle-like *Woodsman Etude*, and Diaz's circular bowing in *Notebooks*. Powers adopted a kind of equable, bland poet-speak throughout, which was incongruous in God's ferocious and sarcastic lecture to Job. The music too, sad to say, was rather of a kind, moderate in tempo, harmony and dynamics (the exceptions: Moe's bitey, quasi-expressionistic rendering of Merwin's dudgeon against his parents for not knowing the names of the trees on their property, and Jaffe's welcome up-tempo, rhythmically pointed and Françaix-like "Variation-Deciso" eighth movement). There were, in all fairness, some entrancing passages here and there, but we failed to detect much that rose to the level of passion. Such is the peril of [design by committee](#).

Fortunately, there was something else to hear, and that something was worth the wait. David McCarroll and Elowitch, violins; Reardon and Carol Rodland, violas; and Brant Taylor, cello, gave us Dvořák's *String Quintet No. 3 in E-flat Major, op. 97, the American Quintet*. We had neglected, in our review of Thursday's performance, to mention our delight at the intelligent and literate printed notes for this year's PCMF by Tim Summers, who to our knowledge hasn't written for it before. On this occasion we enjoyed this sentence: "The only inarguably 'American' characteristics of Dvořák's works is that they were written in Iowa and New York." Well, yes, but of course Dvořák was canny in his use of pentatonic tunes, which occur in many cultures but notably so in Czech and Anglo-Irish folk (and popular) music. There's one particular configuration that we like to call the "Liza Jane" motif, which Dvořák didn't use too much in his purely Czech pieces but which can be heard in nearly all his American ones,

including the finale of the charming Sonatina for violin and piano (it also features prominently in George Chadwick's String Quartet No. 4, his most pointed "response" to Dvořák). And it figures quite a lot in this quintet.

The piece is too familiar to require description. The PCMF ensemble's reading stands among the best we've heard, by turns sonorous, bouncy, and rhythmically precise (Rodland and Reardon perfectly attacked the sharply articulated rhythms of the scherzo, for example, while Elowitch was charming with the accompanying descant). In the double-variation third movement, the lower strings were golden in sound, full of late-afternoon prairie sunshine. Dvořák was generous in spreading out prime passages to all the instruments, with the curious exception of the cello, so when Taylor finally did get a juicy lick in this movement, his warmth was all the more welcome for its scarcity (we also commend his *agitato* tremolo passages). The sprightliness of the Bohemian dance *ritornello* theme of the finale was perfectly offset by episodes of tenderness. It was a great way for Elowitch to bow out and for Reardon (who has, in truth, been performing at PCMF for a few seasons now) to bow in.

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.



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