

## **Pianist Anton Kuerti** **Chamber Music in Concord, Mass.**

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### **Full House for Kuerti and Cerovsek at Concord Chamber Music Society’s German Concert**

by [Christopher Greenleaf](#) February 7, 2010

A decade ago, BSO violinist Wendy Putnam launched the [Concord Chamber Music Society](#) in the first month of our new millennium. Chamber and solo artists have been trouping there with repertoire and playing standards of the sort that usually grace the big urban series, not often the commuter diasporas such as is Concord, MA. The enjoyable home for most of the five annual CCMS concerts is the un-resonant yet clear multi-use hall in the Concord Academy Performing Arts Center, whose gently raked amphitheater seating affords goods view and reasonably balanced sound. The concert on January 31 was sold out, as with may others of this group, a testimony to its founder’s effectiveness as administrator and drummer up of enduring support.

For a good few presenters of classical music these days, pre-concert talks are an important element of programming. When well done, such discussions draw the audience closer to a broad range of scores and assure comprehension and engagement for the performance to follow. Veteran annotator and musicologist Steven Ledbetter, in his ninth season of prefacing CCMS Sunday afternoons with concise and entertaining commentary, established historical place and time for the three very different German 19<sup>th</sup>-century scores on the announced portion of the program. He sparked amusement, interest, and anticipation among his numerous listeners.

No busier modern pianist strides from airport to hall to conservatory than Austrian native Anton Kuerti, who spent close to four decades in this country and has been a Canadian citizen for 26 years. His aura of intensity, a probing musical intelligence, and utter disdain for theatrics makes him among the most enjoyable of serious musicians before today’s public. Throughout his exceptionally productive career, he has been vocal in urging his colleagues to gauge their performance fees so as to reach the greatest number of appreciative listeners, rather than to price a sizable percentage of the public out of the concert hall. He has been an active composer, teacher, and performer.

Kuerti's playing of Beethoven's *Sonata No. 26 in Eb*, Op. 81a, "Les Adieux" (1809-10), went down songful paths, leaving mannerisms to one side. He let the mechanically challenging express-speed passages serve the rhetorical sweep of the piece without once tempting listeners to be distracted by pianistic considerations. There was power aplenty, but also lyricism. It was a great pleasure, by the way, to hear this sonata on a Steinway B, not on the usual concert D. The weight and timbre accorded each octave by this less stentorian model (210cm in length, rather than the D's imposing 275cm) noticeably favor transparency over massiveness. In the busy, at times dense Beethoven, this was a decided plus. Anton Kuerti showed wonderful control of tone and dynamics, though the instrument's cold, somewhat shallow tone production often seemed to get in the way of beauty. This is probably not due to this B's age—a century and some—but to unsympathetic voicing and, no doubt, the heavy use to which cultural life at the Concord Academy must subject it. Many pianos built in the five or six decades before the First World War are doing fine service today. They may, however, have rather better care lavished on them than this once-fine instrument has had of late. The piano's tuning and action were fine.

The other well-known performer on the program was British Columbia native Corey Cerovsek, who has become nearly as peripatetic and in demand as Mr. Kuerti. With good reason, too. His approach to the music is sure, unmannered, and winning to behold. In the Schumann *Violin Sonata No. 1 in a*, Op. 105 (1851), violinist and pianist demonstrated a seamless ensemble consciousness that imbued this by turns intimate and at times briefly extrovert sonata with wonderful unity. The unmistakable shade of Johannes Brahms permeates whole pages of the score, especially where harmonic and thematic density, warmly brush-stroked with lilting affect, lead Schumann to the deeper expression that characterizes his last music. "Ah, the Brahms "Zero"-th Sonata", quipped a violinist afterward. Cerovsek, who studied with Josef Gingold, evokes the spirit of his teacher uncannily. When I was an undergraduate at Indiana University, I had weekly opportunities to take in Gingold's delightfully easy *portamento* and his joy in silken, energetic, unforced sound. Corey Cerovsek exudes his own distinctive personality, of course, and yet a number of listeners commented on his evocation of Josef Gingold. The presence of the late artist-teacher was downright eery. In Cerovsek's hands, his full-throated 1728 Stradivarius, once played by Ferras, Viotti, and Paganini, bolstered this impression, with its sweetly potent and strikingly centered tone.

Following the pause, the stage was not set for the promised piano quartet. Instead, Corey Cervosek and Wendy Putnam sped out, parts in hand, to laughingly explain that this wasn't an opportunity they were going to let slip by. Off they dashed into two charming violin duos by Haydn, two of three movements in a Bb duo sonata, puzzlingly labeled Op. 99 in the 1952 Peters score. In the exuberant opening *Allegro spiritoso*, the two

violins breathed the same heady air of parry, exchange, counter-lunge, and affirmative co-arrival at richly chordal resolutions. The concluding *Andante con variazione* evoked chuckles as the humorously apportioned dialogue of parts whizzed over the full range of each violin.

The largest and least familiar of the works ended the program.

When I work in the eastern reaches of Germany, I seek out chamber concerts with repertoire unlikely to be presented elsewhere. Getting to know a sampling of the Lieder, piano music, and chamber works of Hermann Goetz (spelled without an Umlaut) has been among the rewards of evenings at liberty in Sachsen, Vorpommern, and Thüringen. What does he sound like? Overlay a transparent Dvorákian fabric of deft melodic mobility on a harmonic language not unrelated to Brahms, toss in Ernő Dohnányi's unfettered keyboard bravura, and spin more or less conventionally cast movements out until the thematic and motivic reiterations swirl to vigorous conclusions, and you're on the way to a fair idea of Goetz.

The shaky health of this composer, born in 1840 in Königsberg (Kalingrad), contrasts with his furiously busy compositional activity from a young age. He succumbed early to tuberculosis, having left behind enough finished music to keep his name before the German-language public ever since. And what music! Over the course of its four extended movements, Goetz's *Piano Quartet in E, Op. 6* (1867) leads the listener down almost-familiar *Lindenallées* and *Gäßchen*, ruling their unerring way through musical neighborhoods of an unknown but not wholly foreign Central European cityscape. Yes, the streets do cross a comfortable *Brahmsstraße* here and a well-defined *Schumann-Weg* there, but Goetz's idiom is his own.

Violinist Wendy Putnam, violist Steve Ansell, cellist Micahel Reynolds, and pianist Anton Kuerti chose effective tempi for this long and rewarding chamber work. As Steven Ledbetter remarked in his program notes, Goetz made certain that the pianist had plenty to do, but he also bestowed luminous and interesting writing on each the string players. Now do let us hear the Piano Quintet and Piano Trio in North America, please!

Many thanks to Wendy Putnam and the Concord Chamber Music Society for a varied and satisfying afternoon with known and, on these American shores, still unknown milestones of 19<sup>th</sup>-century German chamber writing.

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