

## ProMusica Chamber Orchestra returns to the Southern Theatre with a spirited performance

Lynn Green Special to The Columbus Dispatch Oct. 11, 2021

Twenty months. Six hundred and eighteen days. That's how long it had been since ProMusica Chamber Orchestra set foot onstage at the Southern Theatre.

But that dry spell is over. With Sunday night's season kickoff, the orchestra is back in full force, and its energy level is as high as ever.

The concert was well-attended, given that we're still living in a pandemic. Some sections were almost full; others had scattered seats occupied. The vaccination and testing review was informal and went smoothly. Season flyers were available, but program books were digital only, with QR codes displayed around the building.

Artistic Director David Danzmayr chose three movements from Bach's "Suite for Lower Strings" to open the season. Despite the title, it's not only for the lower-voiced strings — it's for a string orchestra. The lower voices play a more prominent part than usual, though, often carrying the melody.

Clarice Assad's arrangement tacks together melodies such as "Sheep May Safely Graze" and "Ave Maria" with subtle, yet startling, dissonances in the violins. At first, the orchestra seemed tentative, the dissonances seeming like mistakes. As they continued, though, their hesitance turned to confidence, unlocking Assad's inventive musical vocabulary.

As part of ProMusica's Composer / Performer Project, reflecting a commitment to promoting the careers of living composer-performers, the centerpiece of the first half of the program was Xavier Foley's double concerto "For Justice and Peace."

Inspired by the 400th anniversary of the onset of African slavery in the United States, and focusing on slaves seeking justice in the courtroom, one might expect to hear anger, disquiet or outrage. But no: Foley's musical voice is reflective and wise, not angry. The uneasiness lurks beneath soaring harmonies and conversational snippets of traditional melodies, punctuated with the stark rap of a gavel.

As the work progresses, the string orchestra becomes a chorus as well, singing pleas for equity and representing the slaves' reliance on group song for comfort.

**Foley's articulation is next-level elegance. Each note and phrase is shaped carefully, each weighted with a quietly shifting emotion. Violinist Eunice Kim inhabited the work equally well, with an intuition that nearly matched the composer's.**

Moving on to Bottesini's "Double Bass Concerto No. 2," Foley demonstrated equal technical and artistic prowess in older repertoire, particularly in the first movement's long and virtuosic cadenza. The "Andante" second movement was reverent yet sensuous, dripping with all the charm usually reserved for the cello. The third movement, then, pitted fiery violins against even trickier challenges in a spirited ending.

**For an encore, Foley and Kim offered Foley's self-described "four-minute remix" of the Irish folk song "The Clergyman's Lamentation." Together, the two musicians become much more than a duet. They developed the fullness of an entire ensemble, bold yet buoyant, grumbling yet lighthearted.**

If ProMusica could be said to have a specialty, it probably would be the works of Beethoven. His "Symphony No. 7" was an enthusiastic romp, building and releasing tension, a playful sun revealed behind heavy clouds.

The beloved "Allegretto" was more deliberate than mysterious, with the radiant, major-key sections emerging only to collapse back into the lamenting theme and variations. The "Scherzo" took off breathlessly afterward, vivacious and

spinning, with beautiful timbre from the winds. And then, to top that, the "Finale" was even more breathless — enough so that the strings overpowered the winds — racing relentlessly toward its triumphant conclusion. Time seemed to fly, as did the tempo.

And, with that, the world began to feel a little more normal, a little less "twenty months of a dark stage," and a lot more joyful.

<https://www.dispatch.com/story/entertainment/2021/10/11/review-promusica-chamber-orchestras-return-southern-theatre-jubilant/6087282001/>



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