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Chamber Review

SRJC Chamber Concerts/Sunday, January 11, 2009

Weiss-Kaplan-Newman Trio

Classical Sonoma

AN AFTERNOON OF DELIGHT

by Dan Solter

Sunday, January 11, 2009

On Sunday afternoon, Jan. 11, chamber-music lovers had the pure pleasure of hearing the Weiss-Kaplan-Newman piano trio perform at Newman Auditorium as part of the Santa Rosa Junior College Chamber Concerts series. The varied program was followed by a question-and-answer session hosted amiably by Steve Osborn, and one came away with a vivid sense of each individual musician as well as a deepened appreciation of the music.

The program included Piano Trio No.2 by Benjamin Lees, the Smetana G Minor Trio, and Mendelssohn's Trio No.2 in C Minor, with an encore from Brahms' C Minor Trio. The playing was uniformly excellent, and Newman Auditorium worked well as a trio venue, with only the piano treble slightly diminished.

The three musicians each have careers as soloists, but they have toured widely as a trio. All three performers were able to project a strong musical personality while nurturing a fine ensemble sound. This balance of individual and group was one of the most pleasing aspects of the concert.

Pianist Yael Weiss attracted my attention immediately by her exceptionally strong, fluid left hand, able to generate sparkling arpeggios with a snap, rather than merely keeping time. She studied with Leon Fleisher, a nearly perfect pianist who is especially notable (as was Mozart) for just this quality of left-hand vigor. Her playing captured the wide range of moods required by the program.

Cellist Clancy Newman is a composer as well as a performer, and was most remarkable for the variety of tone he achieved. The role of the cellist in a piano trio is quite different from that in a string quartet; the piano bass is available for much of the structural function, and the cellist has to be able to switch instantly to a lyrical mode without losing rhythmic élan. Newman accomplished this effortlessly. He was by turns elegiac and elfin in the Mendelssohn, somber in the Smetana, and terrific in the Lees. Although he is perhaps less well known than his colleagues, his playing moved me the most.

Violinist Mark Kaplan is plainly a musician of vast experience. He introduced us to his Stradivarius violin, known as "the Marquis," and appeared to be the leader to whom the

others looked for cues. A distinguished soloist, he also has decades of experience with piano trios, where the violin must struggle for even equal billing. I thought he evidenced quiet mastery, steadily projecting emotion. Unlike Heifetz in his chamber recordings, Kaplan does not capture center stage through an overly bright tone; perhaps the ability to blend is a part of the perfection of the Stradivarius as well as that of its player.

I had never heard the Benjamin Lees trio, "Silent Voices," written in remembrance of "voices forever stilled by pogroms and genocides." Lees is Russian by descent, raised in Harbin, China, in the large Russian community that is still well represented in the Richmond District in San Francisco. He has stubbornly resisted trends in musical composition and has achieved an individual voice. The texture of his trio, a single movement of about 15 minutes, is reminiscent of Bela Bartok. This resemblance may stem from Lees' years of study at USC with Halsey Stevens, the passionate advocate of Bartok's music in the 1930s. Lees shares with Bartok an ability to invoke terror and pain with silence and gesture.

Smetana wrote only one trio, which with two quartets makes up the whole of his chamber music. The trio was written to commemorate the death of his 4-year-old daughter; the string quartets, too, are intensely autobiographical. Commentators, knowing the occasion, find constant echoes of death in the piece, but that is not what I heard. The music is solemn, surely, but there are sprightly sections in the finale. I heard tenderness and love, not agony or despair. Kaplan set the tone with seven measures of solo playing on the G string to begin the piece. Compared to my recording by the Amadeus Trio, the Weiss-Kaplan-Newman rendition was calmer and more attentive to detail. Despite its intensely personal program, the piece is firmly in the classical tradition, well deserving of the respectful and contemplative interpretation it received.

The Mendelssohn Trio in C Minor is the second of his two piano trios, and is less often heard than the D Minor. Mendelssohn is once again in favor, but for much of the 20th century his music was dismissed as trivial. While admitting some virtues, various critics have condemned the C Minor as "bombast" (Ulrich), "superficial" (Porter) and "arch," "jog-trot" and "light-weight" (Horton). At the risk of revealing my lack of profundity, I hereby declare this trio a masterpiece. It was written late in Mendelssohn's short life, as he continued to learn and improve his compositional technique. The trio contains almost every mood, and the contrasts were fully exploited by the Weiss-Kaplan-Newman. Their performance was a splendid conclusion to an afternoon of delight.

Any gripes? Not many. The treble in the piano was a little light, but that might have been due to where I sat. The scherzo in the Mendelssohn is in his best elfin vein, and requires absolute accuracy of ensemble. That seemed to be a bit lacking, compared with my Boston Trio recording.

In sum, all three pieces were reflections on death, but one came away, nevertheless, with an enhanced sense of vitality and joy. The golden glow on the late afternoon was not entirely from the welcome sunshine.

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