

Lifestyle

Concert review: Music Alive! Ensembles of Bard College Conservatory in Newburgh

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NEWBURGH — Music Alive! Ensembles of Bard College Conservatory opened the 2008-09 season for the Newburgh Chamber Music series Sunday afternoon at St. George's Church. Fifteen string players, a pianist and a soprano offered a program of 20th-century music and compositions of other Bard students under the expert direction of Joan Tower. It was a varied and skillfully played afternoon of music in the best tradition of this highly satisfying series co-founded by Carole Cowan.

"St. Paul's Suite" (1922) by Gustav Holst evokes the flavor of English folk songs and dances in its four movements. It starts off with a jig in a merry Renaissance romp of lilting strings building to a full-bodied tutti. A brief second ostinato interlude sets a slower pace with repeated figures wavering in the background. An intermezzo features a solo viola accompanied by plucked strings with an Oriental motif framed by a lively dance. The finale begins with a reel that echoes "Greensleeves," which the strings shifted and lifted through infinite variations to a closing whirligig of contrasting rhythms.

Receiving its world premiere, "Weave" by Bard student Conor Brown featured violinists Tuan Xu and Tyme Khleifi. The two created a cycle of eerie high notes and shimmering double-stop trills in their separate developments that include a melodic midpassage that speeds up and closes with a return to the opening trills. The two virtuoso players made this duet a fascinating introduction to a truly original piece.

Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" is a moving and memorable evocation of the beauty of sound with its simple melody that rises to a transcendental treble climax and falls to close with meditative strains of longing and acceptance. The Bard strings rose to the occasion with precise timing and telling emphasis in a rendition worthy of this masterpiece.

"The Triple Fool" is a poem by John Donne set to music by Bard's Benjamin Pesetsky. Mezzo-soprano Tani Maria Rodriguez sang with dramatic flourish, accompanied by pianist Adam Bloniarz. The witty poet begins by self-parody as a lover complaining about folly in love that leads to his writing poetry and the further folly of hearing his own poem set to music. Pesetsky captures the changing tones by high and low chords that mimic the words of "Grief which verse did restrain."

Zhou Long's "Song of the Ch'in" (1985) brought the Chimeng Quartet to the stage to play a work that combines Western and Chinese themes. Announced by cello pizzicati and shimmering violins with glissandi phrases, dissonance develops as piercing calls give way to a quiet recapitulation at the close. The quartet played with conviction and expertise.

Astor Piazzolla's "Verano Portento" ("Summer in Buenos Aires") (1970) combines Latin beat, jazz harmonies and Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" for a delightful melange of tango and syncopated tempos. Violinist Shawn Moore soloed as the string orchestra supplied exciting and energetic support to his dynamic bowing and relentless pace. Like the rest of the ensemble, he showed talent to spare.