

The 2018 Summer Solstice Music Festival in Review

June 18 - 22, 2018

By Morgan Luethe

As has taken place for the past eleven years now in our city, Edmonton played host to an excellent late-June week of terrific music making. The 2018 Summer Solstice Music Festival had something for every taste, from larger scale ensembles to more intimately cast duo concerts. Matching the wide variety in performances was an equally broad survey of chamber music from a range of historical periods. From Mozart to Adams, the festival repertoire was had selections to offer every ear. Once again, this staple of Edmonton's live-music festival calendar succeeded in presenting top-quality artists, both local and international, newcomers and veterans alike, to a warmly appreciative and enthusiastic audience.

The Festival opened with a performance by the electric duo of Davis-Buechner and Chase. The night's offering included music of Mozart (one of his more exploratory violin sonatas) and Turina, as well as more obscure fare from names like Friml and Taku. The first half of the evening's concert was kicked off with a refreshingly breezy work of the 22-year-old Mozart. In the K. 306 violin sonata, it's apparent that the young composer has grown restless working within the traditional, limited scope of the duo sonata producing, instead, a piece of engaging complexity and attention-grabbing tunefulness. The Turina sonata which followed provided ample contrast, mixing rich impressionistic harmonic language with the sultry dance rhythms of the composer's native Spain. Following an intermission spent in sweltering late-June heat (which was well-suited to the dreamy, hazy atmosphere of Turina's violin sonata), rarities from composers Hiao-Tsiun Ma, Kouji Taku, and Rudolf Friml were on offer. Most striking among the fare of the second half was, by far, Taku's *Variations on a Theme of Poulenc*, for solo piano, a work of impressive virtuosity and invention. Rounding out the evening were three sugary treats of salon composer Rudolf Friml, which probably had the least impact on listeners, of all the evening's repertoire. Too many sweets are bad for the teeth, and too much of Friml's sort of stuff makes cavities in the ears. This of course, is a slight against the relative paltriness of the music itself, and *not* the superb musicianship and technical mastery that both Sarah Davis-Buechner and Stephanie Chase command over their respective instruments. All in all, an interesting evening of rare music, some of which deserves more attention than it typically receives.

The centerpiece concert of the Summer Solstice Festival was given by the renowned St. Lawrence String Quartet and wove a thread of musical relatedness through the music of Haydn, Adams and Beethoven. Beginning with an example from his great Op. 20 set of quartets, the players of the St. Lawrence gave a performance of Haydn at his most buoyant and charming, in music which was to give rise to the Mozart and Beethoven's great essays in the genre. The evening's second selection was the *Second String Quartet* of American composer John Adams, completed in 2014. Adams' work presented an interesting marriage of musical tradition and modernity. With much of the work's musical inspiration drawn from Beethoven's Op. 111 piano sonata and Op. 120 *Diabelli Variations*, the piece impressively highlighted the seemingly endless potential melodic and harmonic potential of this well-known material. Adam's masterfully put these quotes through an exciting (and virtuosic) series of paces, producing an impactful work that instilled the notion of just how long-lasting and relevant Beethoven's music today, for modern composers and listeners alike. In an interesting change of program, the second half of the concert featured what is quite probably the very pinnacle of the string quartet genre – the Op. 127 Quartet of Beethoven. This work was performed at last year's Festival as well though, like all six of the composer's great late quartets, their allure for the ear is inexhaustible. The C-sharp minor Quartet is no exceptions

and registers as one of the most profound and exploratory works of the set. From the deep sorrow of its fugue, the mania of its incredible *Presto* movement and the culmination of all of it in a violent and profoundly serious finale, Op. 127 is not only the greatest statement of the string quartet genre, it's one of the most powerful artistic statements in the whole of Western music.

The Festival's final concert featured an eclectic mix of both familiar and obscure work. Pianist (and Summer Solstice Festival artistic director) Patricia Tao was joined by regular collaborators Robert Uchida and Rafael Hoekman, along with other local and international talent, to present the audience with an interesting variety of chamber music scored for a variety of instrumental forces. Charles Loeffler's *Two Rhapsodies* for oboe, viola and piano gave listeners into a glimpse into an interesting sound-world marked by the melding of late German-Romanticism with early French Impressionism, both pieces painting shaded tone-poems of the respective poems on which each draws its inspiration. One of Brahms' Op. 120 sonatas for clarinet and piano (here exchanging clarinet for viola) brought a burnished, autumnal tone to the concert's first half. Following Paul Coletti's *From My Heart*, the great Dvořák Op. 82 Piano Quintet brought the eleventh iteration of the Summer Solstice Music Festival to a thrilling finish. With the irrepressible dance rhythms and effortless folk-inspired melodies of his musical style, it's no great wonder why this piece stands out among Dvořák's considerable chamber output. Highlights, of course, included the endlessly inventive slow movement, as well as the thrilling, unbridled finale. Bravo to our fine local musicians, who continually affirm the quality and longevity of this sort of art in our community.

A special nod, of course, goes to the numerous volunteers who once again came together to bring this calibre of artistry to Edmonton for the eleventh year in a row. As well, our thanks to the various young artists who primed audiences before each evening with the fruits of their musical studies. Besides the Festival's mainstage performances, the week's events included various outreach concerts including the annually well-attended (and this year sold-out) appearance of the St. Lawrence String Quartet at the Yellowhead Brewery, as well as that group's mid-week concert at the Art Gallery of Alberta. Community engagement events like these are crucial when it comes to sharing the Edmonton Chamber Music Society's mission with a local audience and their repeated success year after year is a sign that there is and will remain a place for great live music-making in our city. Until next solstice!