

Broader Scope Without Sacrificing Quality

By Fred Volkmer

The Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival is back for its 17th season. With 11 concerts and two children's programs, it is bigger than ever. And, judging by the first three performances, its size and ambition have in no way compromised the extraordinary quality and thoughtfulness of the programming and the performing.

This year the Festival is providing two children's concerts, in an effort to introduce the young to the joys of classical music. Anyone whose life was changed by hearing Leonard Bernstein's concerts for young people will recognize the lasting value of such an enterprise.

Last Thursday, August 3, in the newly air-conditioned Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church, Festival musicians presented the first of these "Kids Concerts." Titled "Picture This," the program attempted to link to music the desire of a child to draw and paint, with a performance of selections from Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition," arranged for piano and small ensemble by Marya Martin, the artistic director of the Festival.

The program featured, as a guest artist, Joyce Yang, who just turned 14 and has been a student of Joheved Kaplinsky at Juilliard since she was 10. Among other things, Miss Yang has performed the Saint-Saens Piano Concerto No. 2 and the Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The program also featured the teaching artist, David Wallace, who did a remarkable job interpreting this music for the children in the audience. Accompanying these two principals was a chamber ensemble composed



Teaching artist David Wallace leads children in a game of telephone to demonstrate the art of gossip.

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of Marya Martin, flute; Alan Kay, clarinet; Frank Morelli, bassoon; Catherine Cho and Todd Phillips, violins; Rebecca Young, viola; and Timothy Eddy, cello.

"Pictures" refers to an actual exhibition, devoted to the work of Mussorgsky's recently deceased friend, the designer and architect, Victor Hartmann. The "Promenade" which appears in a slightly different form four times in the course of the work, represents Mussorgsky (or "my physiognomy," as he called it) walking through the exhibit.

After the ensemble played the "Promenade" introduction, Mr. Wallace spoke to the young people about the work and the pictures each movement represented. With

the help of a remarkably attentive audience, he clapped out the rhythms for "Baba Yaga" (a witch from a Russian fairy tale who travels in a hut that sports chicken legs instead of whitewalls) with "stomping music" and "tiptoeing music."

Surprisingly, many of the children knew who Baba Yaga was, a tribute to education or good parenting. We saw a picture of the "Ballet of the Unhatched Chickens," which one young member of the audience described as a picture of "a guy stuck in an egg," and we gleefully joined in the universal children's taunt, "Nyah, nyah!" as captured in the movement, "Children arguing after a game."

To illustrate the movement describing the gossiping women in "The Market Place (Limoges)," several children played a Russian version of the game, "telephone," as Ms. Young whispered some gossip to one child, who then passed it on. By the fifth child, the cow that was "lost" had been "found." (Mussorgsky actually wrote gossip into the score.)

Finally, Hartmann's architectural rendering of "The Great Gate of Kiev" (or Mr. Wallace's cartoon of what it might have been like) was shown. This was to have been built for the city of Kiev, but never was. The picture displayed bells and the onion dome of a church, as well as horses passing through the gate.

Miss Yang and the ensemble musically demonstrated all of these, as well as the liturgical music that Mussorgsky wove into the work.

A six-and-a-half-year-old guest critic, Kala Lindtvit, heavy with the responsibility of her calling, remarked, "I thought it was very artistic. There was some loud music and some soft music. And the pianist was very brave." The fact that the next day she talked of nothing else indicates how meaningful the children's concerts can be, even though the composer became "Mike Sikorski."

(It's hard even for a grown up to say "Modeste Mussorgsky" effortlessly.)

And Miss Yang was very brave, and extraordinarily polished. The sight of this delicate young girl playing this knuckle-busting music with such panache and with such finesse and power was inspiring. The extremely engaging Mr. Wilson has a gift for making music relevant to a child's experience.

The program was dedicated to the memory of Louise Blassberg, who enjoyed listening to classical music with her granddaughter, Lee Rice. There will be another children's program on Thursday, August 17, featuring the teaching artist, Keve Wilson, in which children will learn about dance music around the world. I encourage anyone who wants to introduce a child to classical music to attend.

On the previous day, the Festival

began with an all Beethoven program for adults, titled "Becoming Beethoven." Thematically, it traced Beethoven's music from his early efforts to the spiritual deepening of his middle period as his deafness grew.

The first work of the evening was the Serenade for Flute, violin and Viola in D major, Op. 25, featuring Ms. Martin on flute, Todd Phillips on violin, and Rebecca Young on viola. I was struck by the Mozartean nature of the piece. It was polite in nature,

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melodious and at ease, intimately scaled, with finely chiseled proportions.

Each instrument was allowed to shine, and these were three musicians who shone effortlessly.

In the second work of the evening, the Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello in E-flat major, Op. 16, Ms. Young and Mr. Phillips were joined by Timothy Eddy on the cello and Joanne Polk at the piano. The Quartet is a transcription by Beethoven of his Quintet for Piano and Winds (oboe, clarinet, French horn, and bassoon). Both the original and the transcription were published at the same time, bear the same opus number and are nearly identical, given the different number of instruments.

The work was inspired by Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, also in E flat, which Beethoven greatly admired. Though this is actually an earlier work than the preceding Serenade, it is a recognizably more serious work, though it is a seriousness tempered by playfulness.

The performance was characterized by a delightful spontaneous unanimity. Clearly well rehearsed, the ensemble gave the impression that they were creating the Quartet as they went along, so fresh was the rendition, yet so elegant their execu-

tion. There was a youthful ardor in the performance of the string players, and a wonderful pearly quality in Ms. Polk's tone.

The evening closed with Beethoven's Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello in B-flat major, Op. 97, referred to as the "Archduke." The Trio was written during the period when Beethoven was battling the fate that robbed him of his hearing, and facing the fact that love and family would never be possibilities for him. It was written two years after the Fifth Piano Concerto and a year before the Seventh Symphony, and reaches into depths of profundity that the early works on the evening's program only hint at.

Surely Beethoven never wrote a more beautiful slow movement than the Andante of the "Archduke." The excellent program notes quote the great English critic, Sir Donald Francis Tovey, who said of it that it had achieved a "sublime inaction."

The performance was a sheer sensual delight. Tempos were flexible, but with a flexibility that enhances structure. The pacing and the shaping of each phrase was illuminating in that it gave attention to the expressive content of that phrase as well as relating it to the architecture of the work. I was impressed throughout by the delicacy of the timbral mesh of the three instruments, the extraordinary singing tone of Ms. Polk's piano, with all of its percussive potentiality, blending so superlatively with the lush, full-bodied tone of the strings.

Audiences have become accustomed to taking for granted extraordinary performances in the Bridgehampton Festival, and this was no exception.

On Sunday, August 6, Festival musicians offered a repeat of the program for Saturday's benefit at the Atlantic Golf Club, a hauntingly poetic chamber version of Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" and a vivacious rendition of the Mendelssohn Octet, Op. 20.

The Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival continues its 17th season at the First Presbyterian Church in Bridgehampton this week. For schedule and ticket information, call 537-6368.