



An Ensemble that Challenges its Audience

Dachau - Extraordinary works, high caliber musicians, and probing interpretations. For the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp, the Castle Concert Series has offered up a program of exhilarating and occasionally heavy fare: works by composers whose music was suppressed by the Nazis.

The performers were members of the ARC Ensemble, a Canadian ensemble made up of conservatory teachers, graduates and students. The group's name stands for "Artists of the Royal Conservatory", and it also contains a play on words: the English word "arc" can be translated by the word "Bogen" [bow], referring to the bows of stringed instruments.

The concert opened with Mieczyslaw Weinberg's First Violin Sonata, performed by violinist Erika Raum and pianist Dianne Werner. The Soviet composer's work is full of lyrical phrases, violent eruptions, and charming dialogue between the two instruments. Dianne Werner's spirited, sensitive playing and Erika Raum's intense, marvelous tone brought out the urgent and often sorrowful character of the work. The style of the sonata is slightly reminiscent of the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, who was a longtime friend of Weinberg's.

The use of introspective melodies and of harmonies that audiences are unaccustomed to, along with the deep musical understanding of the performers, all made listening along a thrilling experience. The forceful third movement in particular felt like the moment right before the outbreak of a violent storm.

A veritable tempest followed the stormy Weinberg sonata in the next item on the program, Szymon Laks' Piano Quintet. The five players made music that was as bleak sounding as the previous work, and somewhat more impulsive, too. Once things got rolling, the music rumbled with unpredictable explosions of emotion. Dianne Werner and the string players let their hands and bows fly, and the group really shone with its brilliant ensemble work. First violinist Erika Raum excelled just as much as in the Violin Sonata, and violist Steven Dann in particular moved the listener with his warm, full sound.

The entire program, which called for strength, vitality, and emotional adaptability from all performers, also really challenged the audience. After the intermission, the concert turned to some very weighty material: Hanning Schröder's String Quartet. Entitled "In Memoriam: Song of the Marsh Soldiers", the quartet has a tragic story behind its creation: prisoners in the Börgermoor concentration camp were forced to tend to a marsh, and the Song of the Marsh Soldiers was premiered at an event known as the "Zirkus Konzentrazani" ("concentration camp circus"). Hanning Schröder wrote the string quartet after being moved by the courage and strength of those who had suffered there.

The composer was actively involved with 12-tone music and atonality, and this work as a whole sounded far less bound by tonal language than the two previous works. The rhythm, sustained through dissonant syncopations, played a large role in establishing this sense. The musicians conveyed the looming, threatening character of the piece as well as its rage and bitterness. It was almost impossible to listen along without feeling a sense of disquiet and sadness.

After such an unsettling work, one not at all easy to digest, the ARC Ensemble concluded the evening with a piano quintet by Paul Ben-Haim, which the composer wrote while still a student. The piece wasn't so much melancholy as flashy and virtuosic.

The piano quintet featured pianist David Louie, who now and then let loose a bit too much. The melding sounds of cello and viola were given a silvery lustre by the violins, and were fused into delicate trills and furious passagework.