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The Boston Musical Intelligencer

Shelley and Heller Poetry, Sublime Mozart

By Geoffrey Wieting, October 25, 2010

“The formula of combining familiar and unfamiliar music, new and old, is a winning one, and the Musicians from Marlboro lived up to their stellar reputation.”

On Sunday afternoon, October 24, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum presented Musicians from Marlboro, the touring extension of Vermont’s renowned Marlboro Music Festival. The core performers throughout the program, augmented by others at various points, were the excellent string quartet of Ida Levin, violin, Yonah Zur, violin, Beth Guterman, viola, and Saeunn Thorsteinsdottir, cello.

The program began with Ottorino Respighi’s beautiful, elegiac *Il Tramonto* (The Sunset) for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, a setting in Italian translation of a fragmentary poem of Percy Bysshe Shelley. (Both Italian and the original English may be read [here](#)). The poem’s descriptive detail and dramatic development offered extensive opportunities for Respighi’s characteristic lush textures and harmony and near-operatic emotional intensity. The text concerns a prematurely deceased youth, in whom “[g]enius and death contended”, and his lover, Isabel, who continues to live many years later but as a mere shell of her former self.

Jennifer Johnson possesses a voice of exceptional beauty, amplitude, and flexibility. In the opening section she described with voluptuous vocalism the lovers enjoying a beautiful sunset. She was well supported by refined and seductive string-playing. The section ended with a ravishing pianissimo from Johnson as the lovers “mingled lay in love and sleep.” This set up the starkest of contrasts in the next phrase, when the young woman finds her beloved “dead and cold” in the morning, Johnson’s delivery suddenly almost brutal and the accompaniment dissonant and forte. The singer fully inhabited the character of Isabel. Another impressive color shift within a single phrase occurred at “cara creatura perduta” where the singer rendered the first word (“dear,” in English) with fulsome passion which turned almost immediately to subdued grief on the third word (“lost”). As Isabel makes her solitary lament (“Oh, that like thine, mine epitaph were —Peace!”), Johnson gave us a splendid *mesa di voce* on the last word. The final statement, “This was the only moan [lament] she ever made” was sung with the proverbial “tear in the voice.” There were some moist eyes in the audience as well.

The quartet was then joined by bassist Zachary Cohen for Antonín Dvorák’s *Two Waltzes, Op. 54*. The extra bass sonority enriched the texture without sacrificing intimacy. The charming first

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waltz, in moderate tempo, centered around a deliciously effete chord; for this listener it evoked visions of Gilded Age society ladies making

genteel conversation over tea in a café. In the contrasting middle section, however, the famous collector of Bohemian folk tunes emerged for a breath of fresh air before we returned to the café. The second waltz was initiated by a brief violin solo which recurred periodically throughout the piece. This lively waltz was played merrily, and its beguiling melodic material was often played twice, first legato, then staccato. Near the end there was a moment of contemplation before a concluding burst of gaiety.

The next was a piece by Robert Cuckson (b. 1942). *Der gayst funem shturem* (The Spirit of the storm) is a song-cycle setting Yiddish poetry of Binem Heller, who escaped from Warsaw at the outbreak of World War II. To quote Cuckson's notes, "Heller addresses the Yiddish language, which, as much as the surviving remnant of a people, remains orphaned and wounded. Now only the 'spirit of the storm' in 'the final tempest' can bring together the scattered fragments and release the poet from his mourning." The song-cycle used the full complement of performers, the string quartet joined by Jennifer Johnson, Zachary Cohen, Sarah Beaty, clarinet, Angela Cordell Bilger, horn, and Sivan Magen, harp.

The opening song, *Raindrops on the windowpane* (assuming most readers don't know Yiddish, I provide texts in English), spoke of creating worlds from individual raindrops "if all the words will follow — if all the words will sing," like a bard invoking the muse. The performers created a fittingly surreal atmosphere. The second song, *Leave me alone*, featured Johnson frequently singing unaccompanied, i.e., alone, leading one to wonder how firm the narrator's grip is on reality. *Down is easier* was a metaphor open to interpretation, commencing cheerfully with a dream of an apple rolling, then dancing down steps. Again, Johnson's complete involvement made for a convincing journey from cheerful opening to stricken conclusion: "By the last step it remains lying." In the fourth song, *If God would give me wings*, the narrator indulged initially in wishful thinking that with wings she could go "where he won't reach me, the blond angel with his shotgun"; however, she quickly pulled herself back to reality, finishing with a harsh tone on "He wants to see me in my death." The concluding *Songs of yesterday* was a summation, a mourning for beauty and loved ones lost, and a determined statement of hope for the future. Each of the four stanzas was followed by a reiteration of the title, and each of these had its own different shading emphasized by Johnson's facial expressions and vocal colors: mournful, resigned, angry, and hopeful. The poet and composer show us the misery of the Warsaw ghetto obliquely, perhaps, but their work remains deeply affecting, and one could hardly hope for a more dedicated and skillful performance than the Marlboro musicians gave.

After the *sturm und drang* of Respighi and Cuckson, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's life-affirming *Clarinet Quintet* (K. 581) made a perfect anodyne. Clarinetist Sarah Beaty joined the quartet; the two violinists traded places. **The playing was polished and stylish throughout, and all displayed a wide spectrum of tone colors. For this listener the high point was the sublime**

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slow movement, the honeyed solos from Beaty and Zur evoking a gorgeous *bel canto* aria sung by the likes of the much-mourned La Stupenda herself.

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