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Musicians from Marlboro

By Charles T. Downey, October 27, 2012

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[Marlboro Music](#), the venerable music festival in Vermont, comes to Washington three times a year when performers bring some of the summer's programs to the Freer. These free concerts are most welcome to those of us, [unlike Alex Ross](#), not lucky enough to spend some time in the summer at Marlboro, chatting with Mitsuko Uchida over her personalized plate and cappuccino cup at the campus coffee shop. The first instalment of this year's three Musicians from Marlboro concerts was last night, and it combined one beloved gem of the chamber music repertoire, Mozart's clarinet quintet, and three less familiar, more recent pieces.

The discovery of the first half was mezzo-soprano [Jennifer Johnson](#), a current participant in the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development program. She produced a rich, limpid tone, evenly balanced from a coffee-dark bottom to a ringing top that was never strained or strident; a voice one hopes to hear many times more. She sang Ottorino Respighi's extended song *Il Tramonto* from memory, the Italian translation of Percy Shelly's poem *Sunset* illustrated by the composer's string quartet arrangement of the score. The sound of this kind of warm but not overpowering voice with string quartet is so: **one wishes for an entire program of such pieces for a future season of [Vocal Arts D.C.](#) The quartet pieced together from Marlboro provided lush chords, searching lines curling upward, and a dark-hued background for the song's tragic turn**, unfortunately with some infelicitous intonation. Johnson's other piece was just as effective, a 2003 song cycle, *Der Gayst funem Shturem*, by last year's composer-in-residence at Marlboro, Robert Cuckson. These [Yiddish poems](#) (.PDF file) by Binem Heller are a reflection on the tragedies of the Warsaw Ghetto, which the poet managed to escape. The score's odd combination of instruments may reflect the ensemble that was available to the composer, but the possibilities of bringing together a string quintet with harp, clarinet, and horn must limit the future life of the work, as moving as it was. It featured evocative and assured performances from harpist Sivan Magen and horn player Angela Cordell Bilger.

The bon-bon offered between these substantial and tragic vocal works was Dvořák's [waltzes](#),

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two of the pieces from op. 54, arranged by the composer quite effectively for string quartet plus double bass, the latter played beautifully by Zachary Cohen. Both waltzes -- the first melancholy and pleasingly varied in rubato and the second overflowing with vitality and fun -- provided just the right diversion. **As for that Mozart clarinet quintet, the always marvelous [K. 581](#), it featured the best instrumental performance of the evening in clarinetist [Sarah Beaty](#).** John Adams, himself a clarinetist, wrote in his [recent autobiography](#) that the clarinet's technical enhancements have made it a relatively easy instrument for a competent person to play: be that as it may, **Beaty had a consistent and pure tone, controlled and never forced, shaped immaculately into beautiful phrases. The second-movement Larghetto was exquisitely delicate,** inwardly focused and the harmonic tension of the passages in suspensions not overdone, and the third movement's dances were charming. Extensive tuning of the string quartets instruments at many breaks seemed to indicate that the evening's many intonation problems were due to the humid weather or the excessive air conditioning in the Freer's beautiful auditorium. (The group performed the same program at the Gardner Museum on Sunday, and the recording should appear on their [podcast series](#) eventually.) The concluding variations were gay and lively, crisply articulated, with a fun duel between the first violin and clarinet in the fourth variation and an exciting flourish of clarinet cadenza at the end of the penultimate variation.

The last two concerts of the Musicians from Marlboro series at the [Freer Gallery of Art](#) are scheduled for the spring (April 7 and May 5).

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