



East Coast Chamber Orchestra @ Union College 1/8/12

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SCHENECTADY – It’s not just rock bands and cabaret singers that like to promote their records at concerts. The East Coast Chamber Orchestra made a last minute change to their program Sunday afternoon at the Union College Concert Series in order to offer a piece from their new self-titled recording, which was just issued on-line this weekend. (CDs, from the E-One label, are still a couple of months off.)

There was a tinge of disappointment that the new addition was replacing something by Benjamin Britten, but that feeling didn’t last long. “La Follia: Variations for String Orchestra” uses material of the Baroque composer Francesco Geminiani in a lively arrangement by Michi Wiancko, who’s a violinist in the group. You can almost hear a harpsichord in the opening variation, and light percussion was added in some other sections. There were extremes in the levels of dynamics and one extended passage had the effect of electronics thanks to hushed sustained tones and swooping glissandos.

Besides having some fun with orchestration, **Wiancko obviously scored the music with her talented young peers in mind. This was obvious during one of the early variations when each of the 18 string players spun off into their own solo passages. At that moment, it was as if we could see the inner workings of the massive machine that had been functioning so smooth and efficiently the rest of the afternoon.**

The concert began with two rather dissimilar works that were nonetheless performed with the same approach: thick, heavy and purposeful. Schoenberg’s Suite in G Major (“In the Old Style”) included several dance movements — a minuet, gavotte, and gigue — but was on the whole overly robust and a bit plodding. **It’s awesome what ECCO accomplishes without a conductor,** but they could ease up a bit.

You can hardly over do the drama though with Beethoven’s Grosse Fuge, which followed. Here **the weighty intensity from the players was matched by the gravity of ideas from the composer.** Yet the playing didn’t drag either.

After intermission came Dvorak’s Serenade for Strings, a typically tuneful outing in five movements. The Scherzo was pleasant and moody and the muscular sound eased off in the finale, which was still taut and speedy.

By the way, ECCO’s new disc includes the Shostakovich Chamber Symphony, an arrangement of his String Quartet No. 8, which the group performed here just last year.

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