

Edmonton's Summer Solstice Festival

Chamber Music for All Tastes

Bill Rankin

Edmonton is the most northerly city in North America with a population over a million, and those million people endure some of the harshest winter weather on the continent. So when the short summer season arrives, Edmontonians revel in festivals that recognize the resurrection of the human spirit.

In late June alone, there is a cluster of opera, visual arts, jazz, and improvisational theater festivals; but until four years ago, classical music fans felt deprived. University of Alberta piano professor Patricia Tao, a member of the Edmonton Chamber Music Society board, which brings renowned musicians to the city during the cold, dark winters, filled the classical music void with a three-day Summer Solstice Festival in 2008. This year's festival, June 24-26, included some of Canada's most distinguished musicians, several of whom won Junos (Canada's Grammys) in April.

Canadian ex-pat Lara St John, now running a thriving, eclectic violin career from New York, including her own record label, was this year's festival headliner. St John's affinity for the music of Romania and Hungary made her a natural for the first of three concerts with gypsy-inspired themes. Sounding anything but gypsy, the concert began with Haydn's Trio in G, with its Gypsy Rondo, played by Tao's Trio Voce, with cellist Marina Hoover and violinist Jasmine Lin, both of whom live in Chicago. The Haydn choice was clever because by the third movement a little of an ersatz Roma mood was established, opening up all sorts of possibilities.

Roman Borys, the Gyphon Trio's cellist, then joined Edmonton pianist Michael Massey for a slightly labored performance of Bartok's Rhapsody No. 1. Bartok will never make such a musical challenge feel more like play than work, but the result was professional and the control admirable. The Gryphon Trio's violinist, Annalee Patipatanakoon, and Tao then performed Ravel's *Tzigane*, showing that chamber music players are always happy to find a release for their inner soloist. Patipatanakoon delighted the audience of about 300 with the virtuosic flair and lyrical playfulness Ravel built into his display of gypsy fiddling.

Following a polished performance of Brahms's first five *Hungarian Dances* in their original piano four-hands version, played by

husband and wife Angela Cheng and Alvin Chow, both Oberlin profs. St John took the stage with Massey to play two sections of New York composer Gene Pritsker's *Russian Evening Suite*, one of them 'Song', a world premiere. St John, for whom Pritsker wrote the suite, brought the necessary intensity and abandon to the Slavic-inspired music. Her performance of 'Falling', a jazz-tinged, rhythmically erratic movement with just enough melody on top to keep its Eastern European folk foundation in sight, set up nicely the evening's finale, a Michael Atkinson transcription of cimbalomist Toni Lordache's scintillatingly theatrical *Ca la Beaza*. The notions of chamber music covered by the program were vast and quite thrilling.

Saturday's program reflected two sides of Franz Liszt's musical personality, the better-known showman and the religious contemplative. In between the fiery opening 'Campanella' from the Paganini Etudes and the Mephisto Waltz No. 2 in Liszt's arrangement for piano four hands (Cheng and Chow), we heard music that soothed and saddened. The string quartet arrangement of *Angelus* with Patipatanakoon, St John, Borys, and local violist Charles Pilon, satisfied Tao's ambition to bring an assortment of excellent players together for some quickly prepared chamber music. The cohesion of the impromptu ensemble was impressive.

Tenor Anthony Flynn opened the second half with Liszt's Three Petrarch Sonnets. So huge was Flynn's sound that these love songs would have found the beloved's ear if she had been several villages away. His robust projection and warm timbre were impressive but not subtle enough—he had vocal heft to spare. Thousands of singers would kill, though, to fill a room like he can. (On Sunday in several songs from Schubert's *Schwanengesang*, he showed that he can tone it down for smaller effects.)

For me Saturday's highlight was Borys and Tao in Liszt's *Lugubre Gondola*. All weekend Borys demonstrated that music should not only sound fine, but that artists should look like they are moved by it. Lin too has a style that draws the listener into her performances without ostentation.

Sunday afternoon's program was the most conventional: the Schubert, Arensky's Trio No.



Lara St. John

1, and another demonstration of professional aplomb with St John, Patipatanakoon, Pilon, Borys, and Cheng giving a vivid performance of Schumann's Piano Quintet. While the fourth

Summer Solstice Festival ended with music that appeals to chamber music fans everywhere, the treats were the less known repertoire, some of it written "just yesterday".