

North Shore Chamber Festival debuts with impassioned performances

Thu Jun 09, 2011 at 11:09 am



Vadim Gluzman performed works of Stravinsky and Chausson Wednesday night at the North Shore Chamber Music Festival in Northbrook.

It's heartening to see that there are still people willing to start up new musical ventures, even as these difficult economic times for the arts continue.

Thanks to violinist Vadim Gluzman and pianist Angela Yoffe, local aficionados can now add the North Shore Chamber Music Festival to the roster of annual summer events. The married couple's new series made an impressive debut Wednesday night in the first of three programs running through Saturday in Northbrook.

Gluzman has stated that one reason he founded this festival was for the personal pleasure of performing chamber music with his closest colleagues. To be sure, there was a convivial feeling to the evening with relaxed introductions to the works and fiery and committed performances that made manifest the players' musical rapport.

Wednesday's opening program drew a sizable turnout. The Village Presbyterian Church offers an inspired venue for chamber music with a clear and transparent acoustic and fine sight lines, the players performing on a raised platform. Stravinsky's *Suite italienne* proved just the right work to kick off the new series. Drawn from the Russian composer's ballet *Pulcinella*, Gluzman and Yoffe brought out the rhythmic vitality and piquant charm of Stravinsky's retooling of Pergolesi's music. Gluzman was particularly inspired in the Gavotte with his light bowing, playful touch and a deftly varied take on the variations.

Gluzman has stated that he wants the festival to present not just the standard chamber cornerstones but some rarely heard works as well, and Anton Arensky's String Quartet No. 2 certainly qualifies.

Written a year after Tchaikovsky's death, Arensky's Op. 35 is dedicated to his celebrated compatriot's memory, and the quartet has a clear valedictory feeling. The sense of

somber homage is enhanced by the unusual scoring for violin, viola, and two cellos.

I'm not convinced that Arensky's quartet is an undiscovered masterpiece, with the work being hobbled by an episodic, at times ramshackle, first movement. But the central set of seven variations on a Tchaikovsky piano theme from his *Album for Children* is terrific — imaginative, bracingly varied and cleverly laid out for all four players. After a somber opening, the quartet ends virtuosically with Arensky mining a famous Russian church hymn, most familiar from the opening "Slava" chorus of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

Arensky's work could not have received more inspired advocacy with a superb ensemble of violinist Ilya Kaler, violist Atar Arad, and cellists Wendy Warner and Ani Aznavoorian. If the first movement's transitions weren't entirely airtight Wednesday, the players surely underlined the Russian gloom and pensive introspection. The variations on Tchaikovsky's plaintive theme were assayed with great feeling and dedication, particularly Aznavoorian's soulful cello solo and Kaler bringing tender nostalgia and sweet tone to the final variation.

Gluzman introduced Chausson's Concert for violin, piano and string quartet by stating that it is an unapologetically Romantic work that needs to be played that way.

That the Israeli violinist certainly did, with a rich tone and big gestures that brought out the surging, rhapsodic essence of Chausson's score. Yoffe matched her husband's intensity in equally impassioned keyboard playing throughout as did the quartet (violinists Lisa Shihoten and Elina Lev, violist Rose Armbrust and cellist Aznavoorian) with well-upholstered string textures and high-powered, expressive support.

The North Shore Chamber Music Festival continues 7:30 p.m. Friday with Bach's Keyboard Concerto in F minor, Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, Lera Auerbach's *Postscriptum*, and Schumann's Piano Quintet. nscmf.org; 847-370-3984 .

As Ravinia goes pop, summer chamber music thrives elsewhere on North Shore

Sat, Jun 11, 2011 at 1:48 pm



Robert Schumann's Piano Quartet in E flat was the closing work on Friday night's program at the North Shore Chamber Music Festival.

On the same evening that the Ravinia Festival opened its season with a pop show, the inaugural season of the North Shore Chamber Music Festival was blessedly presenting its second evening of bona fide chamber music in the same vicinity.

Indeed, with summer classical music in Chicago left largely to outdoor music festivals that spotlight orchestral repertoire, the idea of an indoor summer chamber music festival fills a real void.

The theme of Friday evening's concert at Village Presbyterian Church in Northbrook was, as violinist and festival artistic director Vadim Gluzman put it, "the art of the slow movement" — works that feature "slow movements so rapturous in their beauty that they are a miracle."

Ordinarily, performing Bach's Harpsichord Concerto No. 5 in F minor (BWV 1056) on the modern piano with a contingent of young string players would not seem like the ideal elements for a promising performance.

But pianist William Wolfram led the New Generation Ensemble from the piano with spirit and aplomb, and with immense attention to transparency, articulation and nuance. The Largo was indeed the highlight, the performance never over-sentimentalizing the music and maintaining momentum throughout.

The Mozart Clarinet Quintet is the Holy Grail of intimate clarinet pieces, often imitated, but none as "pure and pristine," as clarinetist Ilya Shterenberg noted in his introduction.

Shterenberg played the work with as much heart and finesse as could wish, his breath control and steady timbre bordering on otherworldly, with stalwart support from violinists Ilya Kaler and Lisa Shihoten, violist Rose Armbrust and cellist Ani Aznavoorian.

Here, too, the Larghetto was also the highlight, poignant while maintaining Mozartean charm yet never allowed to sag under its own weight.

It added a special touch to the evening to include a Chicago premiere, a work that is a slow movement all unto itself — Lera Auerbach's *Postscriptum* for piano trio with Gluzman, Gluzman's wife and festival executive director Angela Yoffe, on piano, and cellist Wendy Warner.

The seven-minute work begins conventionally enough with a vibrant Romantic melody that gradually morphs into post-Expressionism with dive-bombing glissandi and intervals that clash with the original statement. It is a fun and clever work with a touch of whimsy reminiscent of William Bolcom's shorter pieces.

The highlight of the evening, however, was the finale, a performance of the Schumann Piano Quartet in E flat Major, Op. 47, with pianist Wolfram, violinist Gluzman, violist Atar Arad and cellist Warner.

Arad gave an eloquent account of what makes Schumann's chamber music unique, noting the way Schumann snatched chamber music "from the salons of the rich and into public concert halls" and the way that he placed "melodic lines away from the safety of the bar and the beat," giving the music an excitement and "unsettling" quality.

So true, but rarely is this quartet executed with the energy and finesse that this ensemble accomplished in a remarkable performance of a still-underrated masterpiece.

The musicians presented Schumann's Piano Quartet as an original and distinctive work in its own right, rather than merely as watered-down Beethoven. Particularly fascinating is that cellist Warner actually followed Schumann's instructions to retune her instrument for the third movement, allowing the low B flat that Schumann uses as a pedal point in the Andante cantabile to be heard in its proper register. (Players often transpose the note, which loses the resonance effect Schumann intended.)

The evening concluded with a question-and answer-session with the young performers asking the veterans questions about everything from practicing to their favorite composers and pieces of music and hobbies, with many fascinating insights offered.

If there is a better way to attract more performers and audiences to chamber music than having top colleagues interact with young musicians as they did here, I cannot imagine it. May this be the first of many years of the North Shore Chamber Music Festival.

The North Shore Chamber Music Festival concludes 7:30 p.m. Saturday with a program of Milhaud, Prokofiev and Brahms at Village Presbyterian Church, 1300 Shermer Rd., Northbrook. There will also be a 6 p.m. preconcert lecture and demonstration, "The Golden Era of the Violin" by the Stradivari Society of Chicago. www.nscmf.org; 847-370-3984.

Combustible Brahms closes North Shore Chamber Festival in style

Sun Jun 12, 2011 at 12:25 pm
By Lawrence A. Johnson



Vadim Gluzman and colleagues performed music of Milhaud, Prokofiev and Brahms Saturday night at the North Shore Chamber Music Festival.

The North Shore Chamber Music Festival wrapped its inaugural season in style with another fizzing program Saturday night in Northbrook. The festival, helmed by the husband-and-wife team of violinist Vadim Gluzman and pianist Angela Yoffe, makes a welcome addition to the summer music season, and Saturday's closing concert at the Village Presbyterian Church was on the same high level established at Wednesday's opening event. The evening began with a relative rarity, Darius Milhaud's *Suite* for violin, clarinet and piano. Light in spirits but not ephemeral, clarinetist Ilya Shterenberg, Gluzman and Yoffe gave this buoyant work just the right touch. Gluzman and Shterenberg brought a light melancholy to the *Divertissement*, whirling bravura to the *Jeu* section and stylishly underlined the jazz-tinged blue notes in Milhaud's jaunty finale.

Prokofiev's Violin Sonata No. 2 is such an effective fiddle showpiece that it's easy to forget that it was originally conceived for flute. (As Gluzman noted, all violinists have the great Russian David Oistrakh to thank for convincing Prokofiev to retool his Flute Sonata for the violin.)

Gluzman and Yoffe were clearly in sync with the sonata's duality, bringing out both the elegant lyricism and the assertive virtuosity. The Scherzo was thrown off with frenetic energy by Gluzman, and the Andante had the apt enigmatic quality. The

outstanding performance was rounded off with a driving and dramatic finale with full-throttle playing by both musicians. Gluzman's remarkable instrument—the "ex Leopold Auer" Stradivari—was displayed to especially fine advantage, the violin's blend of gleam and sinew well suited to this uber-Russian music. As with all superb concert venues, after being struck by the initial favorable impression made by the Village Presbyterian Church acoustic Wednesday night, one proceeded to forget about the room and just concentrate on the festival's inspired music-making.

But the performance of Brahms' Piano Quintet that closed the festival really made one appreciate the church's superb sonics anew—rarely will one hear every string line in this work emerge with the kind of clarity and transparency heard Saturday night.

The superb lineup of musicians—pianist William Wolfram, violinists Gluzman and Lisa Shihoten, violist Atar Arad and cellist Wendy Warner—made the myriad riches of this work resound with great impact, putting across the burnished lyricism as surely as the bravura.

One can quibble that the opening bars of the Andante could have been more rapt and at times one wanted more weight and ballast from Warner's cello. But the ensemble for the most part proved a cohesive and well-matched group, and there were several inspired moments—the tenderness of the string playing in the Andante, the swagger to the Scherzo's march-like main theme, and the fluency and natural ebb and flow of the finale, leading to a combustible electricity at the coda.

All the players distinguished themselves—Arad's viola work was especially memorable—and this terrific Brahms performance made a fine closer to a memorable first season for the North Shore Chamber Music Festival. With the Pacifica Quartet taking part in 2012, it should be an equally inspired summer event not to be missed. nscmf.org

Magnificent premiere for North Shore Chamber Music Festival

By Dorothy Andries Classical Music Critic



A blazing cello, a fiery violin, a flaming viola and an incandescent piano. The second evening of the North Shore Chamber Music Festival's three-night series concluded with the Finale of Robert Schumann's Piano Quartet, played with such intensity as to leave the audience breathless.

Friday, June 10 saw a nearly full house at the Village Presbyterian Church on Shermer Road in Northbrook, and it was clear from the start that something new was happening.

The festival is the creation of violinist Vadim Gluzman and his wife, pianist Angela Yoffe, who live in Northbrook. Throughout their international careers they have formed a network of musician friends and they gathered many of them together for this remarkable premiere season.

Playing Friday night were such notables as cellists Wendy Warner and Ani Aznavoorian, who were trained at the Music Institute of Chicago, and have gone on to become soloists and chamber music players with national and international ensembles.

The evening's roster also included violinist Ilya Kaler, the only person to win the Gold Medal at the Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and Paganini violin competitions, violists Atar Arad and Rose Amburst, violinist Lisa Shihoten, pianist William Wolfram and clarinetist Ilya Shterenberg.

The program contained only the names of the pieces played. So before each number a member of the ensemble spoke to the audience about the upcoming music. It imparted a welcome immediacy to experience.

Gluzman himself set the theme by instructing us to listen carefully to the slow movements in the compositions, calling each of them a miracle of beauty.

Schumann's Piano Quartet, with its spectacular finale, was performed by Wolfram, Gluzman, Warner and Arad, who provided insight into one of the composer's most densely Romantic compositions.

Indeed the work's Andante cantabile movement was heartbreakingly beautiful, with Warner drawing a magnificent depth of tone from her cello. It was the wild Finale, Vivace, however, that brought the audience to its feet.

The cohesiveness of the performance, the way the players seemed to communicate through telepathy is rare for a group which does not play together regularly. It was an extraordinary achievement.

Wolfram opened the evening with J. S. Bach's Concerto for Piano and Strings, with the New Generation Ensemble, an advanced group of 14 string players. The piano for the festival was a Fazioli, and its bright tone was magnified by the live acoustics in the wood and plaster sanctuary.

Clarinetist Shterenberg was the star in Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, playing with Kaler and Shihoten, Amburst and Aznavoorian. The Larghetto movement evoked the composer's operas, the melodies flowing like arias for the clarinet. The whole work pulsed with joy, with Shterenberg's clarinet at times seeming to come from afar and growing fuller and more robust as it approached its string companions.

Gluzman, Yoffe and Warner gave the Chicago premiere of "Postscriptum for Piano Trio," a short piece by living Russian composer Lera Auerbach. It began with bright pizzicatos on violin and cello, with the piano entering delicately, notes falling like shiny raindrops. Soon enough, however, the music disintegrated, sometimes appearing to be in free fall. An interesting, but curious choice.

Before the concert three young soloists performed: violinist Kelly Talim, cellist Daniel Kaler, accompanied by his father Ilya on the piano, and violinist Emily Hyun. After that the Magical String of Youth from the Betty Haag Academy of Music played 13 pieces, ranging from works from Leroy Anderson to Bartok to Vivaldi. It was an exceptional salute to young musicians, including those who were barely four years old!

After the concert, all the performers came on stage and took questions from the audience. One of the little violinists asked the esteemed professionals "Did you ever not want to practice when you were growing up?"

Indeed, something new is happening in Northbrook.