

Reviewed



The Viano Quartet with violist Sharon Wei. (PHOTO BY TED SCHANER)

Heavenly Harmonies

PEC Chamber Music Festival 2023 in Review

CHRIS FANNING

The twentieth PEC Chamber Music Festival took place at Picton's Church of St. Mary Magdalene on two September weekends. The six concerts featured much unfamiliar music (some of it never heard before), and some old favourites played by high-calibre musicians spanning several generations. Here are some of the highlights.

Despite the Picton Fair just a couple of blocks away, opening night saw a full house enjoying a performance by the artistic directors of the Festival, the New Orford String Quartet, joined by the former director, pianist Stéphane Lemelin.

Sandwiched between familiar works by Mozart and Schumann was the premiere of a new composition by Canadian composer Marjan Mozetich, his third string quartet, entitled "Aspirations."

With the composer present for this premiere, the New Orford Quartet delivered a nuanced performance of this atmospheric, but interesting piece (somebody called it cinematic). The composer introduced his work as "as-

pirations" in the continual rising and falling of the melody, like the waves of the ocean. The last movement, which had a bit of a waltz rhythm, reminded of the 19th-century quartets of Russian composer Alexander Borodin with its singing romantic melody accompanied by swelling, evanescent figures. It was warmly received with a standing ovation.

The Schuman piano quintet was performed with great joy, the musicians clearly enjoying each other's company. Violist Sharon Wei said it was "like a party on stage." It just flew by.

The cello-piano duo of brother and sister Bryan and Sylvie Cheng offered two stunningly talented musicians (in stunningly coordinated outfits) playing a varied program of more or less unfamiliar pieces.

They opened quietly with William Grant Still's "Summerland" (1935) a gorgeous, peaceful meditation. This was juxtaposed by Paul Wiancko's very modern Sonata No. 1 "Shifting Baselines" (2020). Based around lots of repeating, circling figures, with surprising interjections for difference, it featured

plenty of harmonics and other "outside" sounds for the cello. The blockbuster of the evening was the Frédéric Chopin cello sonata (1847). As one would expect of Chopin, there were many virtuoso passages and lots of competition for Mr. Cheng's 1696 Stradivarius cello to get heard over the piano.

The duo's encore was fantastic: their own arrangement of a Chinese folksong about racing horses, usually played on an erhu: a great galloping showpiece that allowed the cellist to imitate the sound of the erhu in addition to the whinnying of horses, all played with obvious pleasure for the musicians.

The following weekend opened with a traditional piano recital by Mr. Lemelin, the only concert not to feature a living Canadian composer. Following selections from two French composers from the turn of the twentieth century, Gabriel Fauré and Maurice Ravel, Mr. Lemelin brought decades of experience with Schubert's monumental piano sonata in B-flat (1828) to offer a completely convincing performance.

Next up was Philadelphia's youthful Viano Quartet, a hot commodity in the classical world since winning the 2019 Banff String Quartet competition, and having just released their first recording. They made a dramatic entry by playing the first movement of Astor Piazzolla's "Suite del ángel" from different areas of the church, while slowly approaching the stage.

Composer Kevin Lau was present for the performance of his new string quartet entitled "The Train to Improbable Places," which evoked the rhythms and sounds of a train journey, allowing for a variety of musical styles to pass by. Mr. Lau noted in his comments that the Viano Quartet, for whom it was written, played it faster than he had originally imagined, but he was not surprised, since speed and accuracy is one of their defining features.

The main attraction of the evening was Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" quartet. With dedication and authority the Viano Quartet brought new energy to this familiar piece, featuring carefully calibrated dynamics, perfect ensemble playing, and what can only be described as "shredding" in the speed of the final passage. Although performed to perfection, even the members of the quartet were looking at each other with a smiling joy and wonder that implied, "I can't believe we nailed that!"

Each concert offered top-notch music in a church space with a good acoustic. Additionally, each performance also featured a brief Question-and-Answer with the musicians afterward. These sessions revealed how kind, friendly and human these "maestros" are. We are very lucky here in the County that this festival has cultivated such a combination of familiarity and excellence. We're already looking forward to next year! 🎻