

The Dennis & Philip Ratner Museum

Washington Musica Viva, Brahms Birthday Concert

May 4, 2010

Washington Musica Viva presented to its audience Tuesday evening a sneak preview of an upcoming concert at the National Gallery of Art on May 23 by the Teiber Trio, which will play Dmitry Sitkovetsky's transcription for string trio of Bach's immortal *Goldberg Variations*. Because of time constraints, last night's concert presented only selected variations, shattering the careful musical and emotional flow of the greatest set of variations ever composed.

Overlooking the perennial arguments about whether the *Goldberg Variations* should even be played on a modern concert piano, whether any keyboard instrument lacking two registers to help keep the hands and fingers in the most intricate variations physically separated can suffice, this transcription ignores the concerns of Bach purists and shows that the music itself can survive some travel. It was unfortunate that the skimpy program for the concert omitted all information about who the performers were, but Washington Musica Viva audiences will have seen several of them before, especially violinist Regino Madrid. What the Sitkovetsky transcription does for the music is give it greater inner emotional resonance by varying the roles the three instruments play with each other. Though the experienced ear may want to hear this version several times, it is well worth hearing once and promises to be an outstanding offering at the National Gallery; it might also make an elegant CD.

Soprano Elizabeth Kluegel presented the 12 German art songs of Robert Schumann's *Liederkreis*. Unfortunately, the acoustics at the Ratner Museum are unkind to voices backed up by piano accompaniment, and often Kluegel was drowned out by the piano. But this is a performance that could—and should—be repeated at a better location such as the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater, a local embassy, or the Mansion at Strathmore. The Romantic poems of Josef Karl Benedikt contain an element of fantasy that was suitably embroidered by the human voice, against an underlying tone of occasional despair mixed with inevitable longing and a regret that the human world is less rich than the world of the imagination.

After the intermission, the concert finally turned to the stated excuse for the event, the music of Johannes Brahms. Washington Musica Viva founder Carl Banner explained that the *Piano Quartet in C minor* had been first composed in 1855, was simply too personal for the composer to release at that time, or in that terribly obvious version, and was then withheld for 20 years until it could be recast into a new key and largely rewritten. Written after Brahms had fallen in love with Clara Schumann, who remained one of the key figures in Brahms' life, the piece opens with what Banner called the "Clara theme," immediately after a strong piano chord Banner likened to a pistol shot. Banner's suggestion that a rather joking letter Brahms sent his publisher with the music alluded to Young Werther's suicide because of thwarted love may have seemed overheated biography, but the audience woke up and suddenly became attentive to further suppressed communications in the music.

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