

The Dennis and Phillip Ratner Museum

Washington Musica Viva, Waltzes & Trios

September 21, 2010

Every concert by Washington Musica Viva reminds audiences that the nineteenth century was the century of the piano. Rapid developments in technology increased the power and reliability of pianos, and mass manufacturing lowered prices to a point that made the piano an affordable necessity for middle-class households.

The expanding audience of piano owners needed music to play, and composers responded eagerly. Vast quantities of sheet music, and larger pamphlets with entire opuses of fresh music, poured from the presses of publishers and flooded across national borders. The same Chopin waltz that might be played on a remote Russian country estate could be played equally easily in a Parisian apartment or at a hilltop villa in Italy. Entire operas were transcribed for piano. Johannes Brahms, in particular, transcribed much of his music himself for four-hand or two-piano versions, and Naxos has issued more than a dozen recordings of these Brahms piano transcriptions. Later, George Gershwin also transcribed most of his music for piano presentation by two performers.

Under the leadership of talented pianist Carl Banner, Washington Musica Viva assembles small groups of musicians for presentations of chamber music, most often at the Dennis and Phillip Ratner Museum just outside the Beltway. Delighted audiences enjoy an inexpensive evening of music in much the same way that nineteenth century neighborhoods could hear the newest works from Vienna played by modest local performers. In a century when everyone loved music, music managed to be everywhere.

Tuesday's Washington Musica Viva concert also showcased the obvious delight that Banner takes in the music being performed. Unable to leave the printed program alone, he added an introductory ragtime number just to put his audience into a mood, following it with a piano and string trio by American composer Amy Beach, who has never become a household name except among those determined to hang on to the history of American composers.

A very large audience had assembled, perhaps tantalized by the promise that a group of Brahms waltzes would be played as background for dancers. It was an experiment, and Camilla Ng and John Jerz swirled endlessly around within the confined space while Banner played all of the Opus 39 waltzes, several of which are undemanding enough that every emerging young pianist will have made an effort to play them. The experiment would have worked better if it had been possible to have two pairs of dancers, so that they could switch off occasionally, and the eye would not have followed the same bright red dress over and over.

After an intermission, the trio returned to perform Schubert's *Trio in B-flat* (Opus 99), a piece so famous many appreciative members of the audience listened to it with their eyes closed.

Stephen Neal Dennis

www.allartsreview4u.com sndesq@starpower.ent