

The Dennis & Philip Ratner Museum

Washington Musica Viva

August 20, 2008

Wednesday night, the audience of around 100 people who enjoyed the Washington Musica Viva concert at Montgomery County's Dennis & Philip Ratner Museum may have believed they had hit the jackpot of a slot machine. A Brahms clarinet trio, Dvorak's famous "Dumky" trio, a lovely group of twentieth century lieder sung by an accomplished soprano, two pieces by "living" composers (who both just happened to be present), it was like a birthday party with too many presents.

Many in the audience, if they had been given a chance to vote, might have decided the program should have omitted either the John Stephens "Inventions for Solo Clarinet" or Robert Kahn's "Jungbrunnen" songs. Omitting either might have brought the concert safely within the two-hour duration that is the general style for classical music evenings in Washington. Yet a characteristic of Carl Banner's programming for Washington Musical Viva is that it defeats expectations and sometimes even startles with delightful if unfamiliar music.

The program was built around the virtuoso clarinet performance of Ben Redwine, who excelled in the Brahms *Trio in A minor* for clarinet, piano and cello. With a performer of Redwine's skills, it was inevitable that something else showcasing the clarinet would be on the program. Unfortunately, it was the Stephens clarinet solo *Inventions*, in which Redwine chose to play various inventions on no fewer than seven different types of clarinets. Redwine and Banner wheeled out a draped table that was discovered to be holding a bass clarinet, an e-flat clarinet, a c clarinet, an a clarinet, an alto clarinet, a bass clarinet and a contra bass clarinet that required its own stand.

With better program notes, this could have been the difficult heart of the program, permitting a dialogue between composer and performer. The composer's remarks were amusing without being particularly illuminating, and the performer's comments focused entirely on his instruments rather than the music to be played. The music itself was dauntingly "modern" in an idiom that many younger composers have now left behind them. A suitable introduction to an alert audience needed more time than this program permitted.

Soprano Elizabeth Kluegel was perfect for the Kahn lieder, though many in the audience did not have Banner's translations to help them through the emotional variations in the series. This is a portion of the concert that should be repeated elsewhere, before a much larger audience. Lawrence Heinen's *Variations for Sasha*, commissioned by a local pianist father as a present to a clarinet-playing daughter, was impressive though rather brief.

Banner as pianist outdid himself with two major trios in one evening, and the Dvorak trio with its ten separate successive indicated tempos became like an extended trip by tram across the great city of Prague, shifting steadily from one emotional suggestion into another, moving from earnestly lively Czech folk songs or dance themes into more soulful expressions.

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