



THE PLAIN DEALER

MUSICREVIEWCityMusic Cleveland

Warm chamber concert has Italian accent

Friday, December 16, 2005

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CityMusic Cleveland bills its final offering of 2005 as an "Italian Holiday Program," though several of the composers hail from countries northward and most of the music emits nary a seasonal whiff.

But never mind. The influence of Italy, however subtle, can be discerned throughout the evening. And under music director James Gaffigan, the crack chamber orchestra that presents free concerts continues to provide audiences with cohesive and articulate music-making.

The first concert of the program's six-performance run Wednesday at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights drew a large and enthusiastic crowd, despite (or maybe due to) the deep freeze. Gaffigan and company responded with warm, crisp artistry.

Italy, of course, long has been dominant in the operatic realm, and CityMusic's program embraces the genre both from orchestral and vocal standpoints. Gaffigan, who made his international opera debut in June conducting Puccini's "La Boheme" at the Zurich Opera, opened with a pulsating interpretation of the Act 1 Prelude to Verdi's "La Traviata," whetting the appetite for the rest of this masterpiece.

The conductor led equally fervent performances of intermezzos from Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" and Wolf-Ferrari's "Jewels of the Madonna" and a trim, propulsive version of Rossini's "Barber of Seville" overture.

The arias were favorites: "Deh vieni, non tardar" (from Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro"); "Caro nome" (from Verdi's "Rigoletto"); and "O mio babbino caro" (from Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi"). Soprano Lee Kathleen Taylor sang each, as well as the encore of Schubert's "Ave Maria," with polished assurance, if a tad too much vibrato.

Gaffigan was a sensitive and urgent collaborator in the arias and a truly motivating force in the nonoperatic repertoire, especially Respighi's "Trittico Botticelliano," which depicts three Botticelli paintings. The performance illuminated the magical sonorities in these settings, and they were enhanced by wonderfully poetic solo playing from ^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^ bassoonist George Sakakeeny, oboist Rebecca Schweigert and flutist Heidi Ruby-Kushious. Conductor and orchestra also made their way vibrantly through Schubert's "In the Italian Style" Overture.

Matters became more intimate when orchestra members played movements from Bach cello suites. Two fine cellists, Keiko Forrey and Kimberly Patterson, brought distinctive intensity to their movements, while Maximilian Dimoff, the Cleveland Orchestra's principal bass, sounded a bit off-form in his subterranean account.

CityMusic presents this program again at 8 tonight at the United Methodist Church of Willoughby Hills, 8:30 p.m. Saturday at St. Stanislaus Church in Cleveland's Slavic Village, 2 p.m. Sunday at East Cleveland Public Library and 7:30 p.m. Sunday at Rocky River Presbyterian Church.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: