



Review: Clavier Trio at Weill Recital Hall

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By FRED KIRSHNIT

Formed in Colorado and now resident at the University of Texas at Dallas, the **Clavier Trio** offered an interesting and challenging program to a completely sold out house at the Weill Recital Hall on Sunday afternoon.

Like the ensemble itself, Aaron Copland's *Vitebsk* is an American opus with a decidedly Eastern European flair. Opening the concert with this short aural vignette, violinist Arkady Fomin honored his own father who was born in the village of Vitebsk (in present day Belarus). Copland's vision of the diaspora is the aggressive juxtaposition of a Central Asian motif written in quartertones - that is, with the interval between notes half again as small as the shortest Western construction - and a lyrical Jewish melody with its own Oriental tinge. The piece is a bit repetitive for my taste, but the trio certainly attacked those exotic phrases furiously.

The concert as a whole had the subtitle "Mozart on my Mind" and featured a reading of the C Major Piano Trio, KV 548. This was a rather elegant traversal, measured and distinguished, if a little stiff in spots. Settling in to some less violent music, the trio showed some of its unfortunate technical shortcomings, most especially a disproportionate level of accuracy. It was clear that pianist David Korevaar was the superior player, at least in terms of intonation and limpidity. This was a good performance, but there was just enough equivocation to cause a bit of concern.

Wolfgang himself started the Mozart nostalgia craze when he had the stage band in *Don Giovanni* entertain the diners with popular airs from *The Marriage of Figaro*. Since then, virtually every major composer has referred to some Mozart piece during the course of his career. Not surprisingly for a trio whose leader comes from Latvia, the Clavier included a work by his Estonian neighbor Arvo Pärt. Mr. Fomin has a personal connection to this essay, as it was written in memory of his friend and classmate, violinist Oleg Kagan.

Mozart-Adagio has a musical connection to Vitebsk, as well. Mr. Pärt begins the trio with dissonant minor seconds, the closest interval to those Asian quartertones. After painting a landscape of the most discordant kind, the composer introduces in the piano the lovely Adagio from Mozart's F Major Sonata, K.280. The net result of the pairing of the comfortable and the irritating is extremely ear-catching, and not a little disturbing.

Mr. Pärt uses this as a jumping-off point for a melancholy and nostalgic view of the anguished 20th century's harkening back to the optimism of the Enlightenment. Like Gustav Mahler's inclusion of the post horn - the brass instrument that was used to announce the arrival of stagecoaches - in his Symphony No. 3, Mr. Pärt captures just the right feel of longing for a time that can never be again. Both the piece and this rendition of it were quite affecting.

Had the recital ended there, this would have been a very satisfying afternoon. But the ensemble, like Lot's wife, looked back once too often and paid a rather steep price. The inclusion of a huge work of Romanticism like the C Major trio of Brahms was simply a bad decision, the proper execution of such a titan beyond their means. As a group, their tone is quite thin while Brahms demands that most zaftig of sounds. Further, the Clavier suffers from what I like to call "Beaux Arts syndrome." As in the resident trio at the Metropolitan Museum, two of the three members of this Texas band are much younger than the third and, quite naturally, defer to his expertise and experience. The problem for both groups, however, is that the violinist and the cellist of the Beaux Arts and the pianist and the cellist of the Clavier are cowed to the point of unproductive self-effacement.

I felt significant sympathy for Clavier cellist Jesus Castro-Balbi. After toiling away in relative obscurity for the first three pieces on the program, he blew his one big solo in the Andante con moto of the Brahms, emphasizing one either very flat or simply wrong note of the otherwise lovely melody. I was reminded of the story of Brahms who, as the soloist in one of the first ever performances of the Schumann Piano Concerto, purposely made the same mistake that the oboist, who introduced one of the lovely themes, had just committed so as not to embarrass the man. But this day, violinist Fomin did not extend a similar courtesy in his immediate reprise.

Weill is too opulent of a room to ever install a gaudy electric sign warning patrons to turn off their cell phones, but they must do something to prevent the constant assault that we all had to endure this day. I am not opposed to equipping the ushers with sidearms, but of course if they discharge their weapons, they must always employ silencers.