



Thursday, May 23, 2019

Salon Music and Elegies from Trio Céleste



Trio Céleste, l-r: Ross Gasworth, Kevin Kwan Loucks, Irina Krechkovsky.

Trio Céleste, The Music Guild, California State University Long Beach
JIM RUGGIRELLO

Circumstances, meaning other concerts, prevented me from attending any of The Music Guild concerts at Gerald R. Daniel Recital Hall on the campus of California State University Long Beach but the latest one, the last of the Guild's 74th season. The performers were Trio Céleste.

Which engendered a distinct feeling of déjà vu. One year ago, almost to the day, I was able to catch my one Music Guild concert of last season, and the performers were, once again - Trio Céleste. Last season they played a meat-and-potatoes program of piano trios by Haydn, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky. This year's fare was more adventurous, and even featured a composer with a pulse, but was audience-friendly enough so as not to alienate the Music Guild audience, historically rather conservative in their musical tastes.



A delightful piece by Paul Schoenfeld, *Café Music*, opened. Schoenfeld, born in 1947, teaches at the University of Michigan and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. *Café Music* was inspired by a short stint Schoenfeld did as background pianist at Manny's Steakhouse in Minneapolis. The piece, in three movements, evokes 1920s salon music; the first is a jazzy, energetic exercise infused with a comic sensibility in its shifting moods and sudden stops. The second movement is a saucy, lyrical ballad, and the frantic finale a headlong rush with a distinct flavor of honky-tonk and le jazz hot.

Paul Schoenfeld.

There was no mistaking the individual personalities of the trio's members, starting with the first note. Violinist Irina Krechkovsky's playing had an aggressive edge that still managed to swing, while Ross Gasworth's cello took a more elegant approach. Pianist Kevin Kwan Loucks played it grand and large, sometimes overwhelming his colleagues. His pianism had plenty of character and dynamic contrast, but the school's nine-foot Steinway, with the lid all the way up, makes a huge sound unless tempered with restraint.

Everyone knows, or thinks they do, the music of Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884); after all, *The Moldau* (*Vltava*, T. 111) is downright ubiquitous, and *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*, B. 143) graces operatic stages regularly. But *The Moldau* is only one of six tone poems that comprise Smetana's masterwork *Má vlast* (*My homeland*), and the composer wrote eight other operas, a couple of which are more highly regarded than the *Bride*. He also composed several pieces for solo piano, beginning at an early age, and four chamber works, notably the *String Quartet No. 1, From My Homeland*, T. 128, and, more to the point, a piano trio.

Smetana's Piano Trio in G minor, Op.15, was written in 1855 (revised in 1857) as a tribute to his daughter Bedřiška, who died of scarlet fever. Smetana's life was rife with such sorrow and tragedy, and not just because of his controversial espousal of Czech nationalism, his mistreatment at the hand of critics, or his feuds with other musical figures of the day. All but one of his other daughters also died young, as did his first wife, and he himself suffered from ill health throughout his life, and from deafness in his last 10 years.



Bedřich Smetana.

Although Smetana wrote the trio to honor his late daughter, only in the middle section of the finale do I hear traces of an elegy (not to mention a funeral march). Elsewhere, there's intensity and passion, beginning with a Slavic-flavored tune for solo violin that Krechkovsky really dug into.

The themes are lyrical and well worked out, the long first movement changing from light to dark in tone. The second movement, a Brahmsian intermezzo, is almost playful. For the finale, Smetana borrowed themes from his earlier piano pieces, and wove them into a restless, energetic rondo.

Again, the piano dominated. This is one heavy piano part, thick-textured with huge chords in both hands that invite pounding. And pound Loucks did. All three musicians gave committed, technically excellent performances, but the balance was off; whether that was the fault of the instrument, the player, or the way the piece was written, one doesn't know. At intermission, I overheard Eugene Golden, the Music Guild's executive director, mention to the pianist about the balance, and Loucks said he could back off. Lo and behold, he did just that.



Dmitri Shostakovich.

In the Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67 by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), written in 1944, the balance between the instruments was exemplary, each player taking the lead as the occasion demanded. Here the excellence of this ensemble was on full display, as was Shostakovich's bitter humor. This work, too, is an elegy, for the composer's friend Ivan Sollertinsky and for the victims of the Holocaust, about which the world was only beginning to become aware. Several of the themes in the work's four shortish movements have a Jewish flavor, which somehow escaped Stalin's censors.

Gasworth did a masterful job with the opening theme's difficult harmonics, and elsewhere was his elegant self. Krechkovsky's edgy, incisive tone found a congenial vehicle in Shostakovich's faux-jovial cynicism, and Louck's grand, expressive, overt playing was put to good use in this magnificent piece.

The Music Guild chamber concerts are one of Long Beach's best-kept musical secrets (they're also given in Brentwood and the Valley on successive nights). The audience at Daniel is elderly and dwindling. They know their chamber music (no clapping between movements with this bunch), and one wishes there were more of them. In an ideal world, the hall would be packed.

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The Music Guild: Gerald R. Daniel Recital Hall, California State University Long Beach, 8:00pm, Tuesday, May 14, 2019.