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(Music Review) Chamber Orchestra Kremlin, Close Encounters With Music, 10.30.11

October 30, 2011

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH MUSIC
Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center
Chamber Orchestra Kremlin
Sunday, October 30, 2011

Review by Seth Rogovoy

(GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass.) – On a day with the feel of and surrounded by scenery outside that may have reminded the musicians of a snowy winter's day back home, the **Chamber Orchestra Kremlin** under the direction of Misha Rachlevsky helped usher in the 20th anniversary season of the Close Encounters with Music series at the **Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center** on Sunday with a stirring, eclectic concert that ranged from the light lyricism of Elgar to the stormy angst of Shostakovich, with detours in Boccherini, Dvorak and a smidgen of Bach.



Chamber Orchestra Kremlin

After dispensing with Edward Elgar's Serenade in E minor for String Orchestra, Op. 20 (1892), the 16 or so apparently 20-something musicians under the steady hand of music director Rachlevsky, conducting from memory without a score the pleasant diversion, the group sunk its teeth into the program's backbone, Dmitri Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony, Op. 110 (1960), based on his signature String Quartet No. 8 in C minor (performed here in tribute to the life and legacy of longtime Close Encounters supporter and patron John "Jack" Fitzpatrick).

One of Shostakovich's most personal pieces, mostly devoid of the taint of his accommodation with the Stalin regime, the work, performed in five conjoined movements, betrays its geographic origins, as it was originally composed while Shostakovich was working on a film score in the ruined city of Dresden. One needn't have known that tidbit to be touched by the drama, terror and violence inherent in the composition, which immediately following the light and breezy Elgar, plunged the audience into a whirlwind of emotion.

The piece opened with a plaintive, Gypsy-inflected violin solo, undergirded by mournful droning of cello and bass, betraying its origins as a string quartet. The theme was answered, or argued, by the rest of the violin section, perhaps trying to reassure the Gypsy that all was not darkness and gloom, while acknowledging the terrible cost that had been paid.

Under Rachlevsky's taut hand, the Allegro Molto second movement nearly crashed into the opening Largo like a swarm of bees or a chase scene in a cop thriller (indeed, Shostakovich was working on a film score in Dresden when he composed this very cinematic piece, which he dedicated "to the victims of fascism and the war."

The players tackled the composer's dance motifs, which he used not for dances but for frenzied effect, with stern alacrity, popping them out in short staccato-like bursts as if it were a Halloween scare. Shostakovich actually invested this work with his personal stamp, as if it were intended to be his signature – the four notes that dominate the score are D-Eb-C-B, which in German notation are D-S-C-H, letters derived from his name. But again, the effect was overwhelming, and the players rose to the challenge.



Close Encounters With Music Founder and Artistic Director Yehuda Hanani

As did they for Luigi Boccherini's Cello Concerto No. 9 in B flat Major, G. 482 (circa 1765), placed here as a showcase for Close Encounters With Music founder and artistic director Yehuda Hanani, who is also a world-renowned soloist.

And indeed, it was a fitting tribute to the maestro. After taking the measure of Hanani, who nearly left the ensemble behind in a trail of dust or vapor after the opening passage, Rachlevsky's outfit caught up and rose to the occasion of supporting Hanani, and both soloist and ensemble found common ground tonally and in timbre. Hanani used the opportunity provided by the score's cadenza to nod to the music series' 20th anniversary by interpolating the popular "Happy Birthday" melody into the final improvisation – fortunately it fit like a glove, harmonically – and everyone landed together in a final note of triumph.

The Close Encounters With Music series is a treasure of our cultural community, providing as it does the opportunity to hear the greatest art music – from pre-Classical through Romantic, 20th-century, Minimalism, up through to contemporary pieces commissioned specifically for these concerts – performed by world-class artists, among them Hanani himself, and presented in the region's finest intimate concert halls. While the presence of Tanglewood and the summer residency of the Boston Symphony undoubtedly have created the foundation for a strong listener base for classical music in the region, it's Close Encounters that serves to maintain and perpetuate that base, the artists, and the audience on a year-round basis, and in the process forming a genuine community of aficionados and listeners. This is cultural locavorism at its finest. Happy 20th, Close Encounters With Music.

Seth Rogovoy is an award-winning music critic.

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