



The Newtown Bee

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A Concert of Discoveries, Rarities, And A Debut

CONCERT REVIEW

By Wendy Wipprecht

The most recent concert sponsored by Newtown Friends of Music, which took place on Sunday, March 14, at Edmond Town Hall, was an occasion marked by discoveries, rarities, surprises, and a debut. In this performance, the violist Jennifer Stumm and the pianist Tom Poster (who was making his American performance debut) played a number of works written for, or transcribed for, viola and piano.

The first unusual element of the concert was the featured instrument, the viola. Some have called the viola the neglected middle child of the string family, and there is some truth to that. The viola is slightly larger than the violin, and is tuned a fifth lower. It has a deeper, richer sound than the violin. But it is often overlooked in orchestral works compared to the violin and the cello.

It takes the alto line, so it is seldom the center of attention, but it fills a void that would be otherwise startlingly conspicuous. In other words, you may not notice the viola itself, but you miss it when it is absent.

The concert began with *Sonata for Viola and Piano* by Rebecca Clarke. The sonata almost immediately declares itself to be part of the German post-romantic tradition; it is easy to hear echoes of Brahms and Franck, especially in the first movement, “Impetuoso”.

It opens boldly and dramatically, turning into a flowing, impassioned Romantic duet that is followed by a more meditative, serene section, returning finally to the movement’s initial intensity. In other sections, one can hear echoes of Debussy and Ravel.

The second movement, “Vivace”, is a ghostly jig in which the viola’s pizzicato are matched with sprightly, jumpy writing for the piano. “Vivace” might be an understatement for this wild, fast section, which ends almost on a grace note – a speedy vanishing into thin air.

The finale begins with an Adagio section, in which a brief piano solo introduces the viola, which plays in a suppressed, dry-sounding manner. It’s a meditative section that yields to the forceful, propulsive Allegro section that ends the piece. It contains echoes of the first movement and also moves off in several other musical directions, each with its own mood, and ends strongly and dramatically, with a flourish.

The *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (1919) is considered Clarke’s masterpiece and, of course, being a violist, the composer wrote herself a very demanding part, one designed to demonstrate the full range of the powers of the instrument and the performer alike. Jennifer Stumm responded to these challenges brilliantly and seemed to be having a wonderful time as she did so. She could move effortlessly between demands for raw power and

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speedy lightness. The same could be said for Tom Poster, who addressed the difficulties and subtleties of his part with seeming ease.

Next on the program was Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae: Reflections on a Song of Dowland*. In a brief introduction, Tom Poster spoke of Britten's love of the sea, and of Aldeburgh, the town on the eastern coast of England, where he spent many years. The work served as the conclusion for the afternoon's "English half" of the concert.

Britten, who had played the viola as a young man, wrote this very brief work for viola and piano. It is a set of variations on a theme that follows the mournful song "If My Complaints Could Passions Move" by the English renaissance composer John Dowland. The theme, however, is hidden in the low part of the accompaniment. Its harmonies then generate Britten's ten variations, each of which is only about a minute long.

The opening is spooky sounding, and some of the variations are almost too weird – squeaky, dissonant – to be Britten; other variations feature more sustained, songlike writing. The listener experiences a constant, kaleidoscopic shifting of moods, all within a quarter of an hour.

To honor the coming of spring, the second half of Sunday's concert began with what Ms Stumm offhandedly described as "three pieces about birds." The first was *Song of the Birds*, a traditional Catalan Christmas song made famous by the cellist Pablo Casals. The song, whose beautiful melody is given to the viola, is complex, moving from minor to a series of major keys and returning to minor, for a quiet close on a high note. The next piece was *Carenza Jig*, by the Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtag (born in 1926), who is also famous as a teacher of chamber music and piano. The piece is named for a woman named Carenza, who was very noisy and demanding as a child.

The composer's direction is that the work should sound like the shrieking birds of prey. Those shrieking sounds are combined with the jittery, fast tempo of a jig, creating a wild change of pace for the performers.

Another stark change is called for in the third piece, *Song of the Black Swan*, by Hector Villa-Lobos, originally a duet for piano and cello extracted from longer symphonic poem, the piano arpeggiates in an endless series of chords, while the viola sings a plaintive melody. Together, these three "bird songs" offered great and constantly changing challenges to the performers.

Closing the program was the only that can be described as well-known. Schubert's *Sonata in A minor for Arpeggione and Piano, D.822*, although the instrument it was written for is long dead and forgotten. The arpeggione was a six-string, fretted instrument tuned like a guitar, but played with a bow. It was larger than a viola and smaller than a cello, and held between the knees. The only extant arpeggione is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, and the only surviving piece written for the instrument was the one offered last weekend. When the work is heard as a sonata today it is usually transcribed for cello, but it has been transcribed for viola, and is part of the standard repertoire for both instruments.

Besides the structure and beauty of the music, of course, is the matter of performance. Playing Schubert, as with playing Mozart, is a matter of subtlety and delicacy, and of making music that is often quite difficult seem effortless. In addition, the performers are presenting music that the audience often knows quite well, and sometimes knows note for note.

Jennifer Stumm and Tom Poster were all that could be desired. Ms Stumm's performance in the Schubert was rich and nuanced; Mr Poster's accompaniment was just what one wants to hear: refined, delicate, not overstepping the bounds, and completely musical at the same time.

The same held true for their entire program. Of Ms Stumm's authoritative and dazzling performance, one voice from the audience offered a good summary: "Wow! The viola can do that!" And Mr Poster's playing is tempting beyond words. I would love to hear what he does as a soloist, and I know that many in the audience would agree.

Last, and perhaps most important, these young performers had a wonderful time playing. It was a joy to behold, and to listen to.