

Clancy Newman, cellist

*"Newman's exceptional technique seeks not to scintillate but integrate...
he projected interpretive ideas even in Brahms' knottiest moments"*

Philadelphia Inquirer

A joyous one-day Brahms festival

The Astral Artists' concerts posed the question of why they weren't done sooner.

By David Patrick Stearns Inquirer Classical Music Critic

Like most great ideas, Astral Artists' one-day Philadelphia Brahms Festival immediately posed the question of why it hadn't been done anytime recently. Probable answer: Does Brahms' chamber music need a festival? By no means is it neglected, but as the three-concerts-on-one-Saturday festival showed, there's plenty to be said for focusing the attention of listeners and performers, proving the old Mae West aphorism, "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful."

Such was the case in the 1 and 4 p.m. concerts I attended at Church of the Holy Trinity: The ensembles were drawn from past and current musicians in the Astral young-artists roster, beginning at such a high pitch that the rest was challenged to measure up. Cellist Clancy Newman played the tricky *Cello Sonata No. 2 Op. 99*. In the opening seconds, the primary melody encompasses opposite extremes in the cello's range, and few performers are comfortable enough with it to account for why. Newman's exceptional technique seeks not to scintillate but integrate, spotlighting individual notes without having them step out of a meaningful legato line. Thus, he projected interpretive ideas even in Brahms' knottiest moments, making the opening passage a musical question and answer - and a matter of utmost importance. From there, no other performance of *Op. 99* (and as a Brahms geek, I've heard plenty) so masterly told the story of this piece.

In Brahms' *Piano Quartet No. 1*, pianist Marcantonio Barone was the anything-but-pedantic guide to Brahmsian architecture - a hugely welcome approach considering how many performances don't go beyond the basic outpouring of romanticism. Barone's light-fingered treatment also kept any one musical event from claiming precedence over another. The performance truly harnessed architecture as an expressive entity, the natural progression of the music revealing higher, more ecstatic peaks.

As much as the personnel shifted from piece to piece, a consistency of approach was evident. String groups of the first concert (Newman, violinist Benjamin Beilman, and violist Teng Li) shared a steely transparency with the ensembles of the second, 4 p.m. concert (Korbinian Altenberger, Jennifer Curtis, Jennifer Stumm, and Susan Babini). The late-period Clarinet Quintet ensemble was headed by Igor Begelman, who had many of the qualities (legato, tone quality) that Brahms himself described in the clarinetist who inspired the piece's creation.

In the *Piano Quintet Op. 34*, pianist Michael Mizrahi was more low-key than usual: He pointed out the piece was originally written without piano (a string quintet) and seemed to have that antecedent guide his approach. It's not the most engaging way to go, but this is what festivals are for: To try out ideas that render a deeper context to take with you to the next Brahms performance.

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/weekend/classical_music/20091116_A_joyous_one-day_Brahms_festival.html