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CCM and guests shine in wide-ranging string program

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By Lawrence A. Johnson

The Chicago Chamber Musicians opened their 40th anniversary season in September with an eclectic brass program, joined by the American Brass Quintet.

For the ensemble's third subscription program, the emphasis was on music for strings, and with Chicago Symphony Orchestra concertmaster Robert Chen and the gifted young cellist Sophie Shao as guests, Sunday night's performance at Pick-Staiger Hall in Evanston served the well-balanced program with exceptional advocacy....

[Of Bela Bartok's 1st Quartet] Lin, Chen, Solomonow and cellist Clancy Newman delivered a largely polished and idiomatic performance. The middle movement felt a bit unfocused Sunday and, at times, one wanted more fire and thrust. **Newman was exceptional, however, playing with bristling intensity and sharp attacks, the cellist bringing a sense of catharsis to his extended solo near the end of the first movement.**

Newman also served as protagonist in his *Non-Periodic Passacaglia* (2007) a rare solo instrumental work at a CCM concert.

Cellist Clancy Newman in Chicago

“Newman was exceptional...playing with bristling intensity....Newman's performance was a tour de force.”



In his self-effacing introduction, Newman talked of how the work for solo cello was inspired by the binary numbers of the periodic table — with zero = C and 1 = D flat to begin each measure. The work also employs nontraditional tuning with the cello strings set to C-G-C-G rather than the standard C-G-D-A.

That setup seems to presage a forbidding musical science exam but *Non-Periodic Passacaglia* is anything but an arid academic exercise. The work begins with violent widely spaced chords and quickly segues into a kind of heavy-metal display

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piece for cello with blazing virtuosic runs. Halfway through Newman puts down his bow for a bravura two-hand pizzicato section, the music at times taking on a kind of nocturnal Spanish expression.

Newman's performance was a tour de force and earned a well-deserved ovation. With CCM's resident cellist also revealed as a gifted and resourceful composer, the ensemble should consider commissioning a string quartet or larger work from him for a future season.

The evening ended as it began, with Italian music, this time via Russia with Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*.

A mainstay of music festivals and conservatory concerts, Tchaikovsky's string sextet gets played so often one can take its considerable merits for granted, especially with most readings putting across a kind of garrulous competence.

Sunday night's bracing performance, however, made Tchaikovsky's sunny musical postcard come up surprisingly fresh and vigorous. Rarely will one hear this string warhorse rendered with such textural clarity, nor performed with such uncommonly well balanced forces as here, with violinist Chen in the first chair, Lin, violists Solomonow and Anthony Devroye and cellists Shao and Newman.

From the first note, this was as vital and engaging a performance as one is ever likely to encounter, with Chen's elegant solo work leading the group with distinction. Shao, taking the first cello part, blended gracefully with Chen in their duetted passages and produced beautiful, burnished tone in the Adagio with her 1860 Honore Derazey cello, an instrument once owned by Pablo Casals.

The program will be repeated 7:30 p.m. Monday at Gottlieb Concert Hall.

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