

Clancy Newman

Barber Cello Concerto with the South Florida Symphony

“giving it everything one could ask for from a cellist”

High Notes: SYMPHONY REVIEW 11/15/13

By Harry Schroeder. Posted on **Sat, Nov 16 2013** by **KONK Life Editor**

The South Florida Symphony, formerly the Key West Symphony, under the baton of Sebrina Maria Alfonso, gave its first concert of the season at the Tennessee Williams Theater last Friday night. The evening began with Elgar’s “Introduction and Allegro for Strings,” scored for string quartet and string orchestra, and featuring the Symphony’s excellent core group, the Blue Door Quartet. There followed Samuel Barber’s Cello Concerto, with Clancy Newman as the soloist, and the program concluded with Schubert’s Ninth Symphony.

In the Elgar, the Blue Door group was doing double duty: Whitney LaGrange, its leader, was once again concertmaster of the Symphony at large; Luis Casal, second violin, was also principal second; Paula Cho, violist to the quartet, was principal viola; and Arthur Cook again led his cellists. Their double roles required them to play together as a group at one moment, and at the next to move outward as leaders of their respective sections. They did this flawlessly.

As for the string section as a whole, I’ve heard them play more precisely together than they did on this piece. But that kind of precision is best achieved on music of simpler tonality: it is far easier to get that on a scale wise passage of Mozart’s than on

music like Barber’s, with its frequently, and often unpredictably, shifting tonal centers. Toward the end of this piece the writing becomes more conventionally diatonic—there is a long passage which consists essentially of fragments of the major scale—and the strings came together nicely in full concentrated eloquence.

I’ve been a fan of Clancy Newman’s since his appearances at the Impromptu Concerts in a cello-piano duo. Here, playing the Barber, he had much more difficult music in front of him, and he lived up splendidly to all of its many demands, giving it everything one could ask for from a cellist. Years ago I wrote of Mr. Newman that “Listening to him, one understands what is meant by ‘drawing’ a sound out of an instrument. As a result, the best parts of the concert were the slow movements.” This was especially true here, where the Barber second movement was one of those spellbinding musical experiences where everything comes together—a lovely melody, beautifully played, with a strong but never overdone support from the orchestra—and creates an emotional experience which will stay with the audience for a long time.

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After the intensity of the Barber piece, listening to the Schubert symphony, with its familiar opening theme, was like relaxing with an old friend. Frequently, to be sure, a very energetic old friend—there was some quite rousing playing in this piece, particularly from the full and excellent brass section. There were other strengths: tutti passages followed dramatically by sudden breaks; a very precise unison from Mr. Cook's seven cellos; generally fine playing from all the winds; simple harmonies orchestrated by the blending of exactly the right instrumental sounds. The great virtue of this performance was, in a nice contrast to the often jagged phrasings of the Barber piece, the time feel which Sebrina's conducting achieved here: she kept the rhythmic flow going virtually throughout the

four movements, giving it a kind of glide, relaxed and easy, but irresistible. This made that piece an excellent way to end the evening.

There were two hitches in the concert's presentation: the Elgar was delayed because of a mix-up at the lodging of one of the musicians, and the Schubert was interrupted for several minutes when the lights went out. Sebrina handled both problems with urbanity; in the Schubert, when the lights came back on she simply went back to a logical place in the score and proceeded. Key West audiences are used to this sort of thing: the operative answer to all such difficulties is, remember where you live.

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