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NCCO begins 2015– 2016 season with a program of decontextualized selections

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The brief climax measures of Rachmaninoff's vocalise
from IMSLP (public domain)

Last night in the Concert Hall of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the New Century Chamber Orchestra (NCCO), led from the concertmaster's chair by Music Director Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, gave its first San

Francisco performance in its 2015–2016 season. The title of the program was *Letters from Russia*; and (not counting the encore) it featured three stylistically different Russian composers, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Dmitri Shostakovich. (The encore selection was by the most recent Russian composer of the evening, Alfred Schnittke.)

However, a more appropriate title for the program design probably would have been *Taken out of Context*. With one exception (Arvo Pärt’s “Trisagion,” which opening the evening), every piece amounted to an excerpt extracted from another performance setting. As might be guessed, the results were variable.

Most successful was probably the Shostakovich selection, two short pieces (never assigned an opus number) for string quartet. (Peter Laki’s notes for the program book did not mention who arranged the score for string orchestra but did cite that it was not composer.) Both of the pieces are arrangements of orchestral music written for the theater. The first, “Elegy,” began as an aria for Katarina Lvovna Izmailova, the “title character” of the opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (the opera that would eventually lead to Shostakovich’s denunciation by Soviet authorities). The second, “Polka,” comes from the score for the three-act ballet *The Golden Age*, a satirical take on emerging Communist influences in the Europe of the Twenties.

Both of these pieces were richly orchestrated in their original versions. However, Shostakovich’s

arrangements seem to constitute the composer's first serious efforts to write for string quartet. He completed them in 1931 and would not compose his first string quartet (Opus 49 in C major) until 1938. By 1931 Shostakovich had been composing for over a decade, and his opus count had reached 28. Much of his output, however, was orchestral, including his first three symphonies; but he had also composed as his first piano trio and his first piano sonata.

Thus, it is likely that Shostakovich took his time before first trying to write for string quartet. He may have used arrangement as a means of acquainting himself with the expressiveness of the ensemble. The subsequent "translation" of that expressiveness to string ensemble can thus be viewed as a "middle ground" between the original orchestral settings and the string quartet versions that Shostakovich had conceived.

The result is not as sophisticated as Rudolf Barshai's subsequent "chamber symphony" arrangements of later string quartets; but it still makes for pleasant listening, tinged with a bit of foreboding that Shostakovich would soon be entering some very dark times. Taken on its own terms, it is also a well-conceived examination of contrasts, following a study in poignant lyricism with one of unabashed prankishness. Last night NCCO captured both of these spirits excellently, demonstrating that Shostakovich's rhetoric worked just as well with a string ensemble as with a string quartet.

Excerpting was also the strategy to introduce the

NCCO audience to the music of Jennifer Higdon, this season's featured composer who is preparing a new work for the ensemble. The introduction took the form of three movements from three different pieces, all involving only strings. The earliest of these was the "Strings" movement from Higdon's 2002 concerto for orchestra. Laki's notes called attention to the extensive pizzicato work in this movement. More importantly, however, the entire movement amounted to a survey of the capabilities of current violin technique, covering a broad range of approaches to expressiveness, all of them equally compelling.

The next piece in chronological order had its origins as a string quartet (like the Shostakovich selection); but this time the arrangement was the composer's own. The quartet was Higdon's fourth, and it had been written for the Call & Response series of the Cypress String Quartet in 2003. It was intended as a "response" to the only string quartets written by Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, respectively.

Higdon gave the title "Impressions" to her fourth quartet. She then later arranged the third movement of the quartet for string orchestra, calling the arrangement "To the Point." That movement, in turn, took the respective second movements of the Debussy and Ravel quartets, both scherzos with extensive pizzicato work, as a point of departure. However, that departure takes off at some distance from the source, allowing for an entirely new approach to both logic and rhetoric that worked as well in a string orchestra

setting as in its original version.

The final excerpt was “String Lake,” the second movement of a four-movement cycle of impressions of natural beauty entitled *All Things Majestic*, composed in 2011 for the 50th anniversary of the Grant Teton Music Festival. It was not difficult to appreciate the landscape qualities of this music. However, those qualities were a bit syrupy, suggesting that the impressions of the landscape were so strong as to threaten the musical equivalent of speechlessness on the part of the composer.

The soloist for the evening was soprano Aileen Pérez. The longest work on the program was her performance of the conclusion of the first act of Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin*, during which Tatiana Larina writes a love letter to the title character. The narrative contour of that act is a relatively straightforward ascent, and Tatiana’s aria is the peak at which she has discovered that socializing can be more than mere flirting. Clarice Assad did an admirable job of translating Tchaikovsky’s rich instrumentation for this episode into strings-only resources. Pérez similarly gave her material an attentive reading, but one can only really appreciate what Tatiana *is* in this aria by knowing what she *was* when the curtain rises on the first act.

More disappointing was Pérez’ approach to Rachmaninoff’s wordless vocalise. While this music is frequently performed on its own, last night it seemed to suffer from separation for context. Rachmaninoff composed it as the final

piece in his Opus 34 set of fourteen songs. This is a rather imposing cycle covering a diversity of poets and poetic moods. In that setting the final song strikes the listener with a conclusion that goes “beyond words,” dealing with the abstract sounds of the human voice as if it were a rather special form of wind instrument.

Sadly, Pérez did not seem disposed towards such an abstract reading. Her body language strained with the efforts of an individual desperate to say something but deprived of the power of words. This made for a generous supply of overacting that outstayed its welcome long before this relatively short song had reached its halfway mark. It is also worth noting that, while Rachmaninoff’s score covers the vocal range from piano to fortissimo, it is very sparing in moments that get larger than mezzo forte. Pérez was not so sparing, and Rachmaninoff’s spirit was definitely not well served by her approach to dynamic levels.

Far more effective in contrasting dynamics was the NCCO interpretation of Pärt’s “Trisagion,” whose range ran from almost inaudible to frighteningly intense. This was a perfect example of how the full impact of Pärt’s approach to dynamics can only be appreciated through an actual performance setting. That intensity was balanced at the other end of the evening by the Schnittke polka taken as an encore, as sardonically mocking as it has always been **when NCCO performs it.**

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