

Reading Eagle

CONCERT REVIEW

September 30, 2007

Walden Chamber Players delight at Albright

The outstanding ensemble offers fine performances of interesting works at the opening of the college's concert series.

The Albright College Concert Series presented the Walden Chamber Players, a Boston-based group of 13 musicians who play in various combinations, as the first in its 2007-08 lineup Friday night in the Wachovia Theatre.

Oboist Laura Ahlbeck, violinist Joel Pitchon, violist Christof Hueber (the group's artistic director) and cellist Ashima Scripp proved to be an ensemble of the highest caliber, who all shared a pristine, seductive sound as well as an ability to pay solicitous attention to each other.

They started with Mozart's Oboe Quartet in F Major—the only piece in which all four performed together — a rarely heard work whose sweet, airy first movement showcased Ahlbeck. Her tone is gorgeous, never shrill or nasal, and her technique is perfection itself.

The brief Adagio, with its sustained oboe tones over pulsating strings, was exquisite, and the final Rondeau, lilting and full of embroidery, demonstrated the players' dexterity.

By far the most interesting piece on the program was Russian contemporary composer Alfred Schnittke's fascinating String Trio, commissioned in 1985 by the Alban Berg Foundation for Berg's 100th birthday.

The musical kernel on which most of the two-movement trio is based is the final phrase of the song "Happy Birthday." The mood is anything but festive, however. That phrase is wrung through a dissonant, melancholy wringer and leads through a wonderful series of episodes by turns mournful, headlong and creepy. There are galloping troikas, a Mahler-like folk tune and even a nod to "Taps" in the highest range of the cello. It was played masterfully, fading to a pin-prick of harmonic on the violin.

Ahlbeck returned for Benjamin Britten's lovely "Six Metamorphoses After Ovid," Op. 49 for oboe solo. The composer wrought vivid portraits of figures from Greek mythology: the quietly joyous "Pan"; the galloping, ascending "Phaeton"; a mournful "Niobe"; a rollicking "Bacchus"; the serpentine melody of "Narcissus" and the flowing "Arethusa." All were played with a fine sense of shape and color.

The string players ended with Beethoven's String Trio in G Major, Op. 9, No. 1, leaving the audience in a happy mood.

Their playing in the first movement was precise, elegant and full of brio; the violin exhibited a sweet singing tone in the Adagio, in which all three intertwined with great expression; the Scherzo was light and taken at just the right tempo; and the scurrying, jolly Presto was delicious.

—Susan L. Peña, Reading Eagle correspondent