

CONCERT REVIEW

The Berkshire Eagle

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Walden Chamber Players

Berkshire music front and center

By Andrew L. Pincus

GREAT BARRINGTON — Call it vanity or call it necessity: To get a hearing, composers arrange performances of their own works, often in conjunction with those of their colleagues.

Mozart did it. Beethoven did it. A famous American example is the concerts presented from 1928 to 1931 by Aaron Copland and Roger Sessions.

In that spirit, the Boston-based Walden Chamber Players came to Bard College at Simon's Rock Saturday night to play new compositions by Larry Wallach, head of the college's music program, and two fellow Berkshire composers: Alice Spatz and Sheila Silver. Each piece was a Walden commission and world premiere.

Wallach and Spatz are well known in the area — he through his Simon's Rock connection and as a keyboard player, she as a double bassist and teacher. Less familiar, Silver is on the faculty at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and has a home across the border in Spencertown, N.Y.

In line with the commissions, all three pieces were composed for an ensemble of oboe, violin, viola, cello and harp. All three are in the eight- to 10-minute range; all were easily approachable in what seemed to be confident, polished

The most ambitious (or perhaps hopeful) offering was Spatz' "Meditations on Peace," an earnest plea that takes inspiration from texts ranging from the Bible to James Thurber. The sometimes prayerful, sometimes folklike piece, she wrote, is a reaction to "the violence that is so prevalent throughout the world now."

The prize (if there were one) for most ingratiating composition would go to Wallach for his "Forest Music II," which he describes as a divertimento. More airy than woodsy, the piece has a faintly Debussy-like feeling, with the strings listening in on a playful dialogue between the oboe and harp.

Most complex was Silver's "Azim's Dance," which is destined to become part of a chamber opera about a rich-man, poor-man Asian king. Opening with a sizzling, cadenza-like violin solo (brilliantly played by Joel Pitchon), the dancer's music has a distinctly Eastern flavor with a pulsing rhythm and exotic harmonies.

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From outside the Berkshires, the ensemble bulked out the program with works by Isang Yun, Elliott Carter and Alfred Schnittke. The brief Carter piece added to the 100th birthday celebrations for this living American composer.

Carter's 1992 "Immer Neu" ("Always New"), from his Trilogy for oboe and harp, is in his more open late style, in which the instruments nevertheless continue to go off in separate directions. Oboist Laura Ahlbeck and cellist Ashima Scripp stayed the course.

The big discovery in this group was the 1984 Duo for cello and harp by Yun, a Korean who lived in Germany. East and West meet stylistically in an extended meditation that features bent tones in the oboe and sprays of high notes in the harp, and grows progressively slower over the course of its three movements, finally fading into silence. A pervading air of tragedy was strongly realized by Scripp and harpist Franziska Huhn.

From Schnittke, a Russian who lived in Germany, came the 1984 String Trio. Composed in honor of Alban Berg's centenary, the piece is an extended, seemingly crazed set of variations on "Happy Birthday."

In Schnittke's idiosyncratic way, just when things begin to seem like parody, they turn serious. With keening melodies, slashing chords, echoes of "Taps" and a brief quotation from Berg, the ending — when it finally comes — is serious business indeed. Pitchon, Scripp and violist Christof Huebner, the group's director, joined in a transfixing performance.

The program closed the college's South Berkshire Concert Series season and provided one of the too infrequent Berkshire appearances by the Walden group, whose calling card combines the unexpected and the excellent. An enthusiastic audience of about 100 appeared to include a sizable cheering section for each composer.