

Barrie Concert Review – Saturday March 23rd “Sublime Dvořák”



Submitted by Sandra Ruttan
Sandra Ruttan is a musician and teacher

“Sublime Dvořák” concert makes for a sublime Saturday night

On the evening of Saturday, March 23, cars packed the lot at Hiway Pentecostal Church. Those who left them there streamed inside to fill the auditorium to near capacity. These were the Barrie Concert Association ticket holders, who had come out for an anticipated “sublime” evening of listening to the music of Dvořák as performed by the Penderecki String Quartet and pianist, Benjamin Smith. Oxford dictionary defines “sublime” as a word that indicates something of great excellence or beauty, something that produces a sense of awe. It is an apt word to describe what was heard that night.

The renowned Penderecki String Quartet came into existence after winning a major competition in 1986 and its members have since achieved a celebrated international reputation as well as become founders of a top string program at Laurier University. They opened the program with Dvořák’s String Quartet No. 10, Op. 51. Known as the “Slavonic” Quartet, it starts with a whimsically, gentle “Allegro ma non troppo” first movement. Immediate was the sense of musical solidarity as the quartet members played their independent parts seamlessly in sync with each other, their thirty-three years of playing together clearly evident in this unity.

The second movement was a thoughtful “Dumka” characterized by sudden changes in mood. Of particular beauty were moments when the cello or viola strummed an accompaniment to a haunting melody played by the rest. A sweeping “Romanza” came next, and the “Finale”, a movement of energetic merriment.

Pianist, Benjamin Smith, joined the quartet for the next piece. A lecturer, coach and collaborator for the Glenn Gould School and Royal Conservatory in Toronto, he is also known across Canada and the United States for his exciting performances as a soloist and chamber musician. Now a piano quintet,

the five musicians applied their skills to Dvořák's Piano Quintet No. 1. Touted as the lesser known, less impressive of Dvořák's two piano quintets, it was, nevertheless, a marvelous performance. Smith's agile technique and expressive touch along with the bell-like tones of the Shigeru grand piano, created a lovely foil for the textured sounds of the strings.

After intermission the audience was treated to Dvořák's second and better-known Piano Quintet No. 2, Op. 81. The rousing opening movement, "Allegro ma non tanto", made apparent the technical demands that this piece would require. The second movement, another "Dumka", opened wistfully, a crisp, clean but elaborate motif in the piano part sounding like an elaborate bird song. A fast and furious "Scherzo" came next, interrupted momentarily by a meltingly beautiful "Poco tranquillo" section. An unrelenting "Finale" with piano trills "to die for" brought the evening to an excellent close.