

Summer Winds Concert

By Natasha Regehr

The clarinet is a sorely misunderstood and underappreciated instrument. It's the stereotypical "squeaker" of well-intentioned junior high concerts, played by beginners with braces on their teeth and reeds that are always chipped. Eventually these awkward instruments develop into objects that really don't sound so bad after all, but even in their most acceptable moments, they really have no glamour. The big, brassy instruments get all the kudos; after all, who leaves a concert exclaiming, "Wow! Did you hear that clarinet?"

I do, that's who. . . and it happened this Monday night at the Northern Lights Performing Arts Pavilion, when the Summer Wind Woodwind Quintet brought the sound of classical, instrumental music to the Highlands Summer Festival. The event was organized by Haliburton Highlands Secondary School music teacher Tom Regina. Regina was one of 25 founding members of the Festival eleven years ago, bringing to the group a desire to provide an opportunity for musicians to play classical chamber music in Haliburton. Since then his involvement has expanded to include vocal roles in the Festival's many dramas, but this year he decided to pull together a group of musicians to create a woodwind quintet. Preparations for the concert began last fall, with rehearsals beginning in May with teachers Leah Bell (French horn) and Scott Wight (clarinet), as well as arts manager Tori Owen (oboe) and world-renowned bassoon-maker Ben Bell. Each of these performers are accomplished musicians with experience performing locally, in the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra, and in various locations across the country.

The group performed selections by Grieg, Piazzolla, Faure, Chabrier, Ravel, and Gershwin, taking listeners through three continents and two centuries in a pleasant hour and a half. They opened with a suite of four pieces from Edvard Grieg's music for the Ibsen's Norwegian play, "Peer Gynt." Tom Regina laughingly introduced these pieces as tunes that everyone knows from old Bugs Bunny cartoons, particularly the idyllic "Morning" melody that describes the peaceful, unfolding awakening of a sunny dawn. Much darker in tone was the sorrowful lament about the death of the character Aase, followed by the lively Anitra's Dance. A favourite of the audience was the tongue-in-cheek depiction of the snowballing adventures encountered in the Hall of the mythical Mountain King, a troll presiding over the bowels of the gloomy Scandanavian hills.

The second number performed by the group was Astor Piazzolla's "Milonga Sin Palabras," or "Song Without Words." This piece was haunting, visceral, and wonderfully sensuous, and the ensemble brought the Argentinian composer's emotive sense to the audience stunningly and wholeheartedly.

After this passionate offering came a return to Europe for Gabriel Faure's "Dolly Suite." The quintet played three of the six pieces, which were originally composed for piano. The rocking "Berceuse," the frolicking cat's "Mi-a-ou," and the Spanish "Pas Espagnol" brought the audience back to the lighthearted candor of childhood; there were audible chuckles as the piece closed, taking us "trippingly off to intermission," just as Regina had predicted.

The concert resumed with Emmanuel Chabrier's "Espana Rhapsody," which Regina described as an extravagant, free-flowing, irregular piece of music, originally scored for full orchestra. The audience received the selection as a playful scherzo, and was once again charmed by the group's bantering musical exchanges.

The French frivolity continued with a magical performance of Ravel's "Mother Goose Suite," the European Disney of one hundred years ago. We met Sleeping "Belle," the Empress "Laideronette," and Beauty and the Beast in the "Enchanted Garden" of fairy tale lore, expressed once again with all the innocent drama of a child's fantasy story.

In the final excursion, we were flown to America for a little bit of Gershwin, in an "elusive jazz" experience that Regina explained was in fact neither classical nor jazz in the strict sense, but "just good music." The Three Preludes are standard fair for contemporary pianists, and were presented by this quintet in a style that sometimes felt more "rhapsodic" and "irregular" than Emmanuel Chabrier's Spanish Rhapsody. The rhythmic vitality was palpable and direct, causing the audience to respond once again with tittering pleasure.

The group's unexpected encore was an arrangement of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," which audience members were later heard to describe as both "super" and "cool." The crowd left the auditorium laughing and commenting on the "nice variety" of selections that the quintet had played, as they exited into an appropriately summery evening in cottage country.

I'm not sure how many of these satisfied concert-goers went home discussing the merits and qualities of each particular instrument; but here I must confess that, being both a musician and a teacher, I couldn't help but subject my guest to an unrequested list of comparisons and contrasts as we drove home. Like people, you see, each instrument is unique, and, like people, each instrument comes with a reputation. Trumpets are brilliant and showy. Violins are classy; cellos are classier. Harps are angelic, saxophones are showstoppers, kettledrums are powermongers, and tubas are, well, tubas. You get the idea.

The instruments of the classical woodwind quintet are no exception. The bassoon, for instance, is typically referred to as the "clown of the orchestra" for its punchy, comical sound – and the clown hat certainly



Summer Wind performers, top row, from the left, Scott Wight, clarinet, Ben Bell, bassoon, Tom Regina, flute. Bottom Row, Leah Bell, French horn, and Tori Owen, oboe.

came out from time to time. But this bassoon brought other hats to wear as well. This bassoon was the picture of reliability. It was always there when we needed it, grounding the group with its precise rhythms and its ability to somehow adapt itself to any style. I wouldn't have thought of the bassoon as a jazz instrument, but it managed the job admirably when the Gershwin Preludes came along. Even more impressive was the unexpected sensitivity displayed in some of the more brooding pieces, such as the mournful "Aasa's Death."

The flute, on the other hand, has a reputation for being flighty, fidgety, and – dare I say? – girly. But this flute was not the shrill recorder-gone-mad of elementary school, nor the airy-fairy pop-bottle-pipe of middle school. This flute was alternately songful,

cont'd on page 23

Summer Winds cont'd...from page 22

playful, glittering, and mysterious. The dark, melancholic low notes at the beginning of Piazzolla's "Song Without Words" opened into a lovely unison melody with the oboe, supported by the evolving undulating accompaniment of the other players; the effect was gorgeously romantic.

Then there is the kingpin of the woodwind quintet, seated on the throne at the centre of the horseshoe, enjoying the special status of being the only brass instrument allowed entrance to the group. French horn players always look very important, twirling their instruments around in their hands like some kind of golden, intestinal crown (releasing, incidentally, what they would have us believe to be "condensation"); but this horn brought Ravel's "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" to life with mellow, subdued tones, and then treated the "Empress of the Pagodas" to a graceful melody all her own.

The oboe, in contrast, is known as the orchestra's living, breathing mechanical tuner; it is that prestigious instrument that all the clarinet players wish they could play when they find out they can't play the saxophone. This oboe, however, was exquisite in its own right. Its plaintive melodies were unfailingly expressive, and the sustained notes were beautifully controlled, ending with the perfect touch of vibrato. The instrument spoke just as its player intended it to; you could tell by the ease with which each musical thought was completed.

But it was the poor, unassuming clarinet that took my breath away. Simple, one-bar phrases were picked up and set down gently and lovingly, rising and falling with a sense of meaning in every note. At times it merged with the cooing of the flute or the hovering of the horn; at other times, it matched the intensity of the oboe or the cockiness of the bassoon. It was like a conjurer, able to trick the listener into thinking it was anything at all. It was not until the end of the concert, however, that it was deliberately highlighted, and I had to wonder why the world had to wait so long for a little bit of jazz to make that happen.

Thank-you, Summer Wind, for departing from your usual roles as orchestral musicians, and for gathering in tiny Haliburton to charm us with your talents. You had the audience murmuring approvingly and giggling delightedly with your many musical surprises – the most revealing of which being the happy recognition that the humble clarinet has a personality after all. ■