

Something wonderful happened to about 300 of us Marbletoners right in the middle of Stone Ridge Sunday, May 29th and its effect is still with me. I am referring to the third concert in the new Chamber Arts Festival of Marbletown with Jay Ungar, Molly Mason, Jennie Litt and David Alpher the artistic director of the Festival. The wonder came from how deeply moving the experience was, and on how many levels it operated. I suppose it was also so unexpected considering the disparate natures of the performers.

If this were Japan Ungar and Mason would no doubt be considered “national treasures.” They would be generally revered, but better still they wouldn’t have to pay taxes nor any other bills (fancy that!). Our newly minted “local treasures,” on a slightly diminished scale, Alpher and Litt would, if justice were done, find their money no good at Emmanuel’s and Stone Ridge Liquors, and Bruce Davenport would feel obliged to give them all the tomatoes and sweet corn they could eat!

Ungar is one of those low-key niche specialists, and his specialty is American string music, specifically, fiddle music from all over the country from the 18th century to the present. He also acknowledges and clearly appreciates all the national and ethnic music that was the spawning grounds for all the music we now call our own. They are the stock and ingredients for the great soup that is American vernacular music. A lot of this material is, in fact, so familiar, so in-our-bones, that we hardly pay it any real attention any more. Miraculously though, last Sunday such standards as “Camp Town Races,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” and even “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (for pity’s sake!) were performed with such deceiving simplicity, but with such intensity and sincerity that it seemed as if we were hearing them for the first time. The effect was profound, shocking really.

How could Ungar make his unmiked fiddle sound like a dozen all playing in perfect unison? And understand that he is no grandstander, far more at home at a fast simmer than at a rolling boil. Ms. Mason seemed like some kind of Kabuki-esque player in that she hardly seems to be doing very much at all, yet somehow what she does is so important to the sound. She too can make a banjo sound like an entire string section. Of course this is just a trick, after all between her banjo and Ungar’s violin there ARE a total of 8 strings . . . how many strings do you need to form a section?

As for Alpher and Litt: the question was how will a classical pianist and composer, and a socially conscious cabaret singer blend with the purveyors of Civil War classics and West Texas swing? Unbelievably, the answer is . . . perfectly!

Jennie Litt’s lovely voice is perfectly suited to her repertoire (Stephen Foster and Irving Berlin are examples), and her diction and phrasing are superb. She can really sell a song, like Barbara Cook can sell a song. Meanwhile David Alpher proved to be more than adept at supporting and shaping the ensemble’s sound. His playing was articulate, never too forward, and completely on the mark stylistically. He reminded me that the piano, at heart a percussion instrument, is capable of sustaining a firm underpinning as much as providing the melody. In short the balance of this quartet was terrific considering they were rehearsing until 10 minutes before the performance. We were also treated to Ungar and Mason, and Alpher and Litt as duos.

The essence of this concert was about how music has been transformed over time by the great melting pot of the American experience. It is not just that well-known works such as Copland's "Hoedown," from his larger work "Rodeo," comes from a traditional fiddle tune, "Bonaparte's Retreat," or that Irish, Scottish, and Russian music were borrowed from, and paid homage to, by immigrants and their descendants as part of their new American experience. What really shone through was the simplicity of the original works, and the innocence, credibility, and dignity of which they spoke, and which were conveyed so convincingly by the performers. These ideas and experiences that of late have been confused, or worse co-opted, by the needs of politics were here in their original pure form – free of contamination. They persist as the expression of things that people deeply felt, and continue to feel. And that afternoon something really clicked between the performers and their material, and the audience in that wonderful acoustic and architectural space that is the Reformed Church of Marletown on a national weekend of remembrance that produced a truly magical result.

If anyone told me I would be singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" on Memorial Day weekend, in a church with "local talent" and 300 of my neighbors, 99% of whom I did not know, voices raised, tears on many cheeks, I would have said they were nuts! But there I was, and there we were, and we were moved. Talk about the transformative power of music! I can assure you that it was a very different crowd coming out of that concert than went in . . . And this Festival has only just started . . . Nice start.