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Princeton Symphony Orchestra Presents Second Concert of Garden Chamber Music Series

By Nancy Plum

Princeton Symphony Orchestra has found a way to make live music happen — on the grounds of Princeton’s Moven Museum and Garden. For the second time this fall, a small ensemble from the Symphony presented a concert from the porch of the Moven pool house, with an audience spaced out in 50 or so “pods” on the lawn as part of a “Chamber Music in the Garden” series.

Despite a definite chill in the air last Thursday afternoon (and its effect on the wind instruments), the five principal wind players of Princeton Symphony were clearly delighted to be back in the performing arena — their first live performance in six months. As flutist Yevgeny Faniuk, oboist Lillian Copeland, clarinetist Pascal Archer, bassoonist Charlie Bailey and hornist Jonathan Clark played the hour-long program, Princeton Symphony made concertgoers comfortable on the grass with offers of blankets and plenty of room to see the concert.

Chamber ensembles of strings or brass bring together instruments with similar sound palettes, but a quintet of winds offers a wide variety of orchestral colors and ranges. Jacques Ibert, composing in Paris in the first half of the 20th century, wrote a number of short works for theatrical productions which often used for wind quintets because of space limitations. In 1930, Ibert pulled together three of these incidental pieces to create *Trois pièces brèves*, a concert triptych for wind quintet. The musicians of Princeton Symphony presented these three pieces as crisp music to match the fall air, with a uniformly chipper sound and clean melodies passed among the instruments. The five players demonstrated rhythmic precision, but that did not stop them from also exhibiting their own individual *joie de vivre* at being back on a concert stage.

The musicians all showed well their solo capabilities, with instruments coming together in elegant duets of varying

combinations. Hornist Clark was subtle in the first *pièce*, becoming more present in the third movement of Ibert's set. Clarinetist Archer provided a bird-like solo in the third movement, and all players observed Ibert's French style with elegant lifts at the ends of phrases.

The quintet took the audience across the English Channel in the next set of pieces, with a performance of Malcolm Arnold's *Three Shanties* for wind quintet, composed in 1943. Arnold, who lived through much of the 20th century in England, maintained an extensive instrumental repertory, including music for brass and wind band. Each of his *Three Shanties* is based on an actual sea shanty — a folk song sung by sailors as they performed their physical labor onboard a ship — and the players of Princeton Symphony well captured the sea atmosphere.

The first of Arnold's *Shanties* was the most familiar, based on the rollicking "What Shall We Do with a Drunken Sailor?" The quintet effectively executed the off-beat rhythms and quirky "drunken" nature of the piece, as well as the transition to a tango-like closing section. A lilting dance-like character marked the second *Shanty*, based on the early 19th-century tune "Boney was a Warrior." Faniuk's clean flute playing helped convey the raucousness of the closing movement, based on the early 20th-century Massachusetts tune "Johnny Came Down to Hilo," with Clark providing energetic accompaniment on the horn.

Hungarian-American composer and conductor Denes Agay had a varied career as composer and conductor, as well as arranger for film and television. He wrote more than 90 books about music, including numerous compilations of piano music. His 1956 *Five Easy Dances*, set for woodwind quintet, musically captured dances popular Europe and Latin America throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In Thursday afternoon's performance, the opening "polka" featured melodies passed among instruments and an overall tight ensemble sound. Flutist Faniuk led the second movement "tango," as the players stretched the rhythms and sauciness of the dance. Particularly clean thirds between clarinet and oboe marked the fourth movement "waltz," and the set closed with a bit of a big band sound to characterize the "rumba" on which Agay had based the music.

Following a spirited arrangement of George Gershwin tunes set by Tony Esposito, the quintet closed the concert with what was probably the most serious work on the program — Samuel Barber's one-movement *Summer Music*. Premiered in 1956, this piece set the relaxed languidness of summer for wind quintet. Barber well utilized the various colors of the wind instruments, creating unique pairings and exploiting registers not often heard. Introduced by horn and bassoon, *Summer Music* showed a wide palette of musical shadings, with haunting melodic passages from the oboe and clean chords from all players. Despite Barber's insistence that the work is meant to evoke the atmosphere of summer — not the killing of

mosquitoes — one could easily hear the “zapping” of summer bugs in the crispness of the instrumentalists’ playing.

Like all performing arts organizations, Princeton Symphony Orchestra has been trying to make lemonade out of the lemons of a public health lockdown. The sight of people wending their way to pods with chairs, coats, and scarves was reassuring, and as the days become more chilly, the players of the Symphony deserve special kudos for pursuing high-quality performance in weather that might not be the best for their instruments.

Princeton Symphony Orchestra will present its final Chamber Music in the Garden concert on Thursday, October 15 at Morven Museum and Garden. Featured in this performance will be a brass quintet performing music of John Williams, Jerry Goldsmith, and the Beatles. Princeton Symphony will also present a virtual concert on Sunday, October 18 at 4 p.m. featuring cellist Pablo Ferrández and music of Simon, Bach, and Shostakovich. Information about either of these concerts can be obtained by calling Princeton Symphony Orchestra at (609) 497-0020 or by visiting princetonsymphony.org.

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