

Klezmer and Kreutzer with CityMusic (Mar. 16)

by Stephanie Manning



Most clarinetists are no strangers to playing on all the different varieties of their instrument. But using three of them over the course of just one piece? That's a little more unusual.

On March 16, Daniel Gilbert sat facing a packed crowd at the Temple Tifereth-Israel with a B-flat, A, and bass clarinet all laid out in front of him. The work he was about

to embark on with conductor Joel Smirnoff and the CityMusic Cleveland Chamber Orchestra was also a little unusual — but in a very intriguing way.

Osvaldo Golijov's *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* is a work of many layers. There's the overarching narrative framework based on the history of Judaism. And then there's the music itself — 35 minutes of slowly shifting atmospheres and a steady push and pull between soloist and string orchestra. Here, Gilbert felt less like a traditional soloist and more like an integral part of the orchestra. In the haunting Prelude, he expertly camouflaged his sound to blend, chameleon-like, into the rest of the ensemble.

While the piece draws on Klezmer traditions, it often favors the slow improvisational feel rather than more energetic tunes. But in the second movement, a hummable clarinet melody begins to take shape with a violin (concertmaster Laura Hamilton) as its partner, eventually building to a dance tune that made more than a few listeners' heads start bobbing. Still, much of what makes the work interesting is hidden in the more subtle shades, its atmospheric ebb and flow made engrossing by Gilbert's mastery of phrasing. The clever use of all three instruments in all their registers created the illusion of one large clarinet — including bass clarinet notes so high I wouldn't have believed them possible.

The uneven time signatures and layered syncopation in the earlier movements made the string accompaniment feel hesitant at times, but by the time Gilbert first picked up his A clarinet, the ensemble had found their groove. Smirnoff did not use a baton, a decision that allowed him to shape lines carefully, though he also lost some rhythmic precision in the most complex textures.

The no-baton route worked better in the back half of the program with Beethoven's *Violin Sonata No. 9 in A*, "Kreutzer" — a work that was much more familiar territory for both musicians and audience. The arrangement for string orchestra gave every section a chance at the most well-known melodies, including a number of cello solos played spiritedly by principal Anna Bowman. The violins proved themselves a united front with a seemingly endless array of quick passages in perfect unison. The basses in particular seemed to be enjoying the music as they studiously kept the ensemble anchored.

Although the "Kreutzer" was considered quite avant-garde in its time, it now feels quite traditional to the modern ear — especially when paired with *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*. Perhaps one day works like Golijov's will be heard the same.

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