

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

*a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston*

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## Yes Portland Has No Programmatics

by [VANCE R. KOVEN](#)

It came this time with no programmatic theme, the works rather being arrayed by size of ensemble, with a clarinet trio, piano quartet and string quintet. Thus did the 23<sup>rd</sup> season of the Portland Chamber Music Festival get underway Friday at Hannaford Hall at the University of Southern Maine's Abromson Center.

Beethoven's familiar and popular op. 11 Trio in B-flat Major got things started with a work that has forever confounded those seeking to number the composer's piano trios. Though written originally for clarinet, cello and piano, Beethoven also transcribed it (not entirely satisfactorily, in the opinion of many violinists) for conventional piano trio. So which is it? Beethoven's only clarinet trio or the Piano Trio No. 4? Exactly.

In 1798, when Beethoven had not yet fully given himself over to the earnest reshaping of musical form and substance, he imbued this three-movement entertainment with geniality, charm, and occasionally naughty abrupt harmonic twists *à la* Haydn. Too many performers treat it perfunctorily as a historical curiosity—well, it's still Beethoven, so we have to play it. Luckily, the PCMF ensemble comprising Todd Palmer, clarinet; Peter Stumpf, cello; and Diane Walsh, piano, gave it a reading of genuine substance, though not without the occasional minor hiccup. It took a moment or two for Palmer to settle into his customary tonal elegance, and Stumpf, a distinguished teacher as well as performer, may have over-calculated his stylistic approach. Save in his excellent solos in the slow movement and finale, his projection seemed problematic. Yes, this is early Classical-era Beethoven, so full-throttle resonance (about which more later) should be out; but Beethoven hadn't counted on the projection of a modern nine-foot Steinway, and while Walsh regulated her touch admirably, still, you know, nine-foot Steinway at full stick... These quibbles aside, for warmth, fluidity, masterful twining lines, and fun with dynamic contrasts, this ensemble made a splendid fist of it.

The first half closer, *Margini Uno*, a 2010 work for piano quartet by Italian composer Carla Magnan, was played by violinist Anna Lim, violist Christine Grossman, cellist Trevor Handy, and Walsh. Written for the Chopin bicentennial, it constitutes a six-minute riff on Chopin's Mazurka, Op. 6,



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No. 3 (which Walsh played

*Carla Magnan, composer (file photo)*

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with great *élan* as a contextual *amuse-bouche* before the Magnan). Magnan explained her title as arising from her perusal of the Chopin manuscript and thinking about the look of its margins. Don't ask; we usually find less than meets the eye in explanations like this. She appears to have been primarily interested in the jerky, sprung mazurka rhythm, which pops up within and among the relatively sparse instrumental lines. These are also rich in the sound effects that many contemporary composers substitute for expressive devices. Being thus music about music, it was, in the expertly precise and crisp performance it received, reasonably intelligible. This type of deconstruction—"explosion," as Walsh put it—of earlier music owes something to Stravinsky's treatment of Pergolesi (et alii) and Tchaikovsky, though we didn't sense in the Magnan his affection for and deep stylistic understanding of his sources.

Brahms's String Quintet No. 2 in G, op. 111, in a sonorous and supple performance by David McCarroll and PCMF Artistic Director Jennifer Elowitch, violins, Beccal Albers, and Christine Grossman, violas; and Stumpf, filled the second half. From the get-go it was clear that with a big Romantic piece and without the nine-foot monster dominatrix, Stumpf could be as eloquent and forward as could be desired. The opening movement, by turns exuberant and *gemütlich*, offered a real treat. McCarroll's tender sweetness in the upper registers, and Albers's mellow amber glow, informed the development section. The songful variations in the slow movement continued this trend, with Stumpf's pizzicati resonating and the ensemble's carefully crafted dynamics lending both charm and structural definition. In their desire to wring very drop of juice from the plummy intermezzo, the group did not completely avoid sluggishness, but their concluding pianissimo waxed exquisite. In the finale, Brahms stays his hand so much that both players and audience strain against the shackles until the vigorous, boisterous gypsified coda brings joyful relief to everyone's satisfaction.

**Vance R. Koven studied music at Queens College and New England Conservatory, and law at Harvard. A composer and practicing attorney, he was for many years the chairman of Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble.**

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