

**Camerata New England String Octet: Of Sublimely Beautiful Music and Grace Notes**  
by Jo Evarts for *The Complete Hoot*, April 2013

We recently had the chance to hear the remarkable Camerata New England at their string octet concert at Sacred Heart Church in Lebanon, NH. The group came to our particular attention when it won the Best Classical Music Concert for Go for Baroque last season. Classical music is a particular interest of ours (both in performance and as audience members), and we've tended to go to the concerts at the large, named venues in our area. The cost is high in the larger venues, but you can always count on the superior quality ...

So you can, we found, with Camerata New England, and you have the distinct pleasure of doing so in a more intimate concert setting. There is no substitute for this. One of our lifetime high moments was listening to Vivaldi in the church Santa Maria della Pi eta in Venice, Italy. This is the church where Vivaldi played the music he composed, and where his young girls' school performers learned to perform. We heard the First Violin part played on a Stradivarius violin that is kept in the church for the express purpose of their concerts.

We were astonished to find ourselves comparing the Camerata New England concert to our experience with that Vivaldi concert. The octet (Jae Lee, Alice Hallstrom, Joshua Peckins, Joshua Pollock, violins; Frank Shaw and Mark Berger, violas; and Linda Galvan and Leo Eguchi, cellos) are eight string virtuosos with the gifts of passion for music and superlative ability with their instruments. Evelyn Zuckerman, pianist for Camerata New England in other concerts, gave opening remarks for the music, and the backgrounds of Max Bruch, Felix Mendelssohn and Astor Piazzolla added piquancy to the experience.

The first number, Max Bruch's String Octet in B-flat Major, is a beautiful piece of Romantic music. Bruch had a long and prolific career as a composer, and he was firmly rooted in the Romantic style despite the passing of years and other contemporary developments. This octet has three movements requiring very exact precision, and the musicians were outstanding. The concertmaster and first violin, Jae Lee, is an exquisite musician, from the plucks of the pizzicatos to the lyricism of the most Romantic passages. This Bruch octet is unusual in that there are eight distinct parts, rather than, say, parallel duets. Mark Berger as first viola in the Bruch was outstanding and Linda Galvan as first cello was sublime. The ways in which Bruch interweaves the parts, the unique sounds of each instrument and the emphases within the music were interpreted by the members of this octet in a flawless performance, from grace notes and trills to longer, lyrical passages.

The Octet played two of Piazzolla's works, *Four for Tango* and *Libertango*. What a marvel Piazzolla is as a composer. He began composing at age 19 and by age 28 was proficient in three instruments. He grew up in Argentina, and then followed his love of Classical music. His compositions are integrations of tango harmonies and energy within a more Classical framework. Piazzolla's love of accordion (bandalione) which he played as a child is tempered by his love of Bach in his piano and violin years. The music sounds at moments like tango, or like jazz or like Bach, and his compositions blend these beautifully, as was evident in this superlative performance. Whether playing atonally below the bridge or sweetly and dramatically sweeping

up the entire scale, Lee, Galvan, Alice Hallstrom and Mark Berger brought the Piazzolla not only to a certain vibrancy, but also to a certain appeal that was new to us.

In the second half of the concert, Camerata New England varied their performers on some of the parts. Frank Shaw took the first viola parts, for example. This is one way the group keeps every piece and every performance so fresh. The eight members of the Octet are all exceptional musicians.

Mendelssohn's Octet in E-flat major, op. 20 is my favorite Mendelssohn. As Camerata New England interpreted this work with an immediacy that was passionate for musicians and audience, I was transported to the first time I heard this Octet, which was also my first symphony concert at the DAR's Constitution Hall (Washington, DC) when I was 9. An octet stepped forward in the beginning of the second half of that concert and my love of Classical and Romantic music made the leap from playing piano and listening to LP 33s into what great music is meant to be: an immediate, transcendent experience. Camerata New England achieved this in their superb concert. The new venue at Sacred Heart served them well, with outstanding acoustics. From presto to andante, from pianissimo arpeggios to expert trills, the musicians of the Octet were outstanding, uniformly. Camerata New England provided a concert as fine as any in the urban venues of our East Coast, a fact that the generous supporters listed in the program have obviously known for a long time. We are now, happily, among their devotees.