

## PRO MUSICA COLORADO PRESENTS THRILLING, VIRTUOSIC “RAINBOW STRINGS”

By Kelly Dean Hansen, freelance classical music writer

Amid the continuing coronavirus pandemic and the more recent surge of the delta variant, the return of live classical music to the front range and to Boulder County has been sporadic, but increasingly regular. The University of Colorado College of Music has resumed its full schedule of in-person performances, and organizations such as the Colorado Music Festival and Colorado MahlerFest occurred over the summer without major incident or interruption.

Pro Musica Colorado Chamber Orchestra, the small but indomitable professional ensemble led by music director Cynthia Katsarelis, provided a strong reminder of what we have missed for much of the past 18 months with a breathtaking strings-only concert Thursday at Longmont’s Stewart Auditorium, to be repeated 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Boulder’s First United Methodist Church.

PMC has always given just due to the familiar masters, but Katsarelis has been particularly mindful of presenting works by lesser-known figures, especially from marginalized groups. The concert’s title, “Rainbow Strings,” reflected this. Of the three works, two were by familiar LGBTQ composers, one modern and hugely successful, the other one of the greatest names in romantic-period music. The third was by a prolific Afro-French composer, well-known in his day, but rarely performed today.

Jennifer Higdon is the most popular living American composer. Her acclaimed works are performed with regularity by orchestras, chamber ensembles, and soloists. “Dance Card” is a five-movement suite for string orchestra composed in 2015. The five pieces have colorful titles, reflecting their celebratory nature and the joy of musicians playing together.

The work is extremely virtuosic, with metric complexities, along with frequent and heavy division of parts into fully independent lines. The faster movements, including the opening fanfare called “Raucous Rumpus,” the central “Jumble Dance,” and the closing “Machina Rockus,” are exuberant and full of overt virtuosity, while the slow movements, the rhythmically challenging “Breeze Serenade” and the beautiful, extended “Celestial Blue,” are full of profundity.

Higdon indicated that the pieces could be performed individually or selectively, but Katsarelis and the orchestra presented all five, and they do form a cohesive unit. The professional players, particularly the section leaders, played this difficult music with gusto and confidence, and while it might have taken the audience a bit of time to make a connection with the music, by the end, the listeners were fully engaged.

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was a contemporary of Haydn and Mozart. Born on the French Caribbean Island of Guadeloupe to a wealthy landowner and his wife’s African slave, Joseph was taken to France when he was young and became a brilliant athlete and musician. A renowned champion fencer and member of the king’s bodyguard, as well as a

virtuoso violinist, prolific composer, and orchestra leader, the Chevalier nonetheless experienced the prejudice and marginalization that would be expected for a person of mixed race at the time. That he was as successful as he was bears testimony to his talent.

Harumi Rhodes, University of Colorado professor of violin and second violinist of the Takács Quartet, was guest soloist in one of the fourteen violin concertos by Saint-Georges, No. 9 in G major. Katsarelis has always been able to attract the highest-caliber soloists. The concerto is a substantial piece of music, particularly the extended first movement. Rhodes played this lesser-known music with great respect and diligence, particularly in the surprisingly dark and profound slow movement.

The performance obviously dispensed with the optional wind instruments. The orchestra provided a strong, collaborative partnership with Rhodes.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, one of the most popular of all composers, can hardly be called “marginalized,” but he was the first classical master whose homosexuality was generally acknowledged by scholars and musicians. His Serenade in C major is one of the greatest works for string orchestra. A work of lush, luxuriant sound, it has delighted audiences since its premiere.

Katsarelis brought out that sound in a masterful performance that was particularly notable for her choices of tempo. The contrast between the slow introductions and the main sections of the two outer movements was perfectly balanced, and the well-known second-movement waltz moved at a graceful clip. The most impressive interpretation, however, was the slow movement in third position, called the “Elegy.” It was played with enough emotion, but with just the right amount of forward propulsion, again with effective contrasts between the flowing main portion and the slower music that frames it.

This was a rich and substantial concert, with a “rainbow” of musical colors on brilliant display. The remainder of the season, especially the return of wind instruments, can be anticipated with enthusiasm.

*Submitted October 8, 2021*