

St. Cecilia stretches with Ginastera tribute

By Ron Emery

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Glen Falls

The St. Cecilia Orchestra is back on track after a midwinter cancellation and a reshuffling of its 1995-96 subscription series that meant a substitution for the announced version of Leonard Bernstein's "Candide," unavailable because of a projected New York City performance.

Friday's concert in the ballroom of the Queensbury Hotel in Glens Falls (repeated Saturday at Union College Memorial Chapel in Schenectady) was a tribute program to the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983). The concert was one of the ongoing series paying homage to important 20th-century composers. Already honored have been such composers as Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Conducted by St. Cecilia's new principal guest conductor Peter Bay, with world-class soloists Nancy Allen, harp, and Lisa Hansen, flute, the orchestra strutted its stuff from a Ginastera string quartet played by the first chairs of the string section, otherwise known as the Wilde String Quartet, to two pieces that swelled the orchestra to 35 players, a Haydn-size orchestra.

In doing honor to an important Latin American composer, St. Cecilia also stretched itself. Ginastera's music is technically and rhythmically complex. Fortunately, all the forces were in top form. The concert also honored the youth, the commitment to excellence and the refinement of the St. Cecilia Orchestra as it approaches its 10th anniversary season next year.

Hansen was the exemplary soloist in the opening three *Impresiones de la Puna* for Flute and Strings, Ginastera's musical impressions of the desert region of northwestern Argentina. Hansen was right at home with these folk-like melodies, written when the composer was only 18. She soared lyrically on air for the first two movements and bounced nicely in the South American dance of the third movement.

St. C.'s lovely string sound was, if anything lushier than in past concerts, more in synch under Bay's baton *Impresiones*. A little dry, the hall was a support.

Ginastera himself considered his Harp Concerto his most complicated and difficult work. Playing the concerto without a score, Allen was magnificent, meeting all the technical demands with verve and polish but never stinting either on the wonder of Ginastera's genius. Allen performed the dazzling cadenza before the last movement – a cadenza that is a Chopinesque study in sweeping glissandos of various sorts – with rhapsodic grace and spontaneity.

Bay and St. C gave Allen terrific support in a transparent, spot-on focused performance that managed nicely Ginastera's Kaleidoscopic changes of orchestra color. The final movement in particular danced along with a cheeky punch and variety.

It takes a bit of courage to schedule a string quartet on an orchestra concert since current wisdom suggests audiences are different for orchestra and chamber concerts. As it turned out, Ginastera's four-movement String Quartet No. 1, written in 1948 but not played until 1951, was just the thing to emphasize the rhythmic genius of this music and particular cellular melodic gift of Ginastera.

The Wilde Quartet – Philip Spletzer and Rob Taylor, violins; Julius Wirth, viola; Douglas Poplin, cello – threw themselves into this complex score with the abandonment of aerialists, meeting most of the score's challenges with no need at all for a net. The drive of the opening movement was particularly winning as was the contrasting “night music” of the slow third movement marked “clam and poetic.”

The evening ended with Ginastera's Variaciones Concertantes, a theme, twice stated with 11 variations. It stands with Britten's “Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge” as one of the outstanding sets of variations in 20th century music, a kind of concerto for orchestra. Bay and Saint C were at their very best in this music.

St. Cecilia's Founders' Concert featuring music by Spohr and Mendelsohn opens at the Canfield Casino in Saratoga Springs on Friday, March 22, and continues at Chancellors Hall in Albany on Saturday, March 23, both at 8 p.m. Phone 433-9513 for concert details.