



Violinists to the rescue! Chamber Music Northwest kicks Covid to the curb

Oliver Neubauer and Soovin Kim step in for performances at CMNW's "Folk Ingenuity" and "Slavic Scenes" concerts.

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Oliver Neubauer, Sophie Shao, George Li, and Paul Neubauer performed Suk's Piano Quartet in Kaul Auditorium at CMNW 2022. Photo by Tom Emerson.

“Is there a violinist in the house?” That was the urgent question at two recent Chamber Music Northwest concerts. The pandemic caused CMNW’s summer festival, currently celebrating its 52nd season, to find virtuosos who could take over demanding pieces on short notice – like three days. Sheesh!

Fortunately, the festival is stocked with top-tier talent, and the substitute violinists didn’t miss a beat. I’m talking about Oliver Neubauer, who stepped in for Jennifer Frautschi to play first violin in Josef Suk’s *Piano Quartet* on July 2, and CMNW co-artistic director Soovin Kim, who took first chair for Jessica Lee in Anton Arensky’s *String Quartet No. 2* on July 9.

In a way, the switcheroo of personnel actually helped to underline this year’s festival theme, *Inspirations & Influences* – a celebration of diversity and cultural crisscrossing that features a delicious smorgasbord of performers and pieces.

Folk inflected music

Weaving folk-like melodies into classical compositions is a time-honored tradition for many composers, such as Dvořák, whose pieces were influenced by native Czech tunes. CMNW’s *Folk Ingenuity* concert highlighted that idea at Kaul Auditorium on July 2 with music by Bohemian composer Josef Suk and African-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, plus a dollop of Dvořák.

Suk was one of Dvořák’s best students—he was only 17 years old when he uncorked his masterful *Piano Quartet in A major*. In recognition of the piece’s superb quality, Dvořák selected it for the commencement ceremony at the Prague Conservatory. A few years later Suk married Dvořák’s daughter—but that’s another story.

Suk’s *Piano Quartet* received a passionate, exciting performance from pianist George Li, violinist Oliver Neubauer (given the moniker “Rookie” by CMNW co-director Gloria Chien), violist Paul Neubauer (Oliver’s father, and a CMNW stalwart), and cellist Sophie Shao. The ensemble elicited the lovely, lyrical themes and exchanged numerous melodic phrases with panache. Their execution of the second movement (Adagio) contained a terrific, dramatic pause right after ratcheting things up to an electrifying forte, and followed that with a subdued section that wound down to a wonderfully restful ending. Their spritely playing in the fourth movement (Allegro con fuoco) included a tender

dialog between the violin and the viola that transitioned into a playful section and a joyful conclusion by the entire ensemble.

Coleridge-Taylor was motivated by Dvořák's music when he wrote his *Clarinet Quintet in F-sharp minor*. Although Coleridge-Taylor was only 19 years old when he wrote his quintet while studying at the Royal College of Music, it contains very sophisticated harmonic language that includes folk-like melodic inventions.

The **Viano Quartet**—this year's CMNW Protégé Ensemble—collaborated with clarinetist and former CMNW artistic director David Shifrin to create a thrilling performance. Incisive playing by the strings (violinists Hao Zhou and Lucy Wang, violist Aiden Kane, and cellist Tate Zawadiuk) generated intensity right out of the gate. In contrast, Shifrin's smooth sound added a soulful sweetness to the second movement (*Larghetto affettuoso*), and at one point he intoned a few bird-like notes that echoed into the lines of his colleagues. The Scherzo of the third movement was vigorous but not aggressive. The fourth balanced sudden outbursts with lyrical passages.



David Shifrin and Viano Quartet performed Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's Clarinet Quintet in Kaul Auditorium at CMNW 2022. Photo by Tom Emerson.

Dvořák's own *Humoresque*, consisting of eight pieces for the piano, has been very popular ever since he wrote it in 1894; **the seventh is the most famous**, a melody that practically everyone knows. Violist Neubauer and pianist Li gave a sensitive performance of No. 7 in a new arrangement by Edmond De Luca and CMNW Protégé Composer Alistair Coleman. Neubauer sculpted a carefree mood that was tinged with a hint of melancholy, and Li augmented it with a light bouquet of flowers from the keyboard. Coleridge-Taylor's *24 Negro Melodies* for piano, published in 1905, includes his warm setting of the *Deep River*. Paul Neubauer and George Li delivered a soulful performance of the spiritual in an arrangement by Maud Powell and Neubauer. Coleridge-Taylor's piece—based on just the first four bars of the original song—alternated between contemplative and stirring variations until Neubauer brought it to a conclusion on a high note that was plaintive yet infused with hope.



Paul Neubauer and George Li performed Dvořák and Coleridge-Taylor in Kaul Auditorium at CMNW 2022. Photo by Tom Emerson.