

North Shore Chamber Festival opens with exhilarating Russian program

By Lawrence A. Johnson

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Quick, what is the second greatest Russian sextet?

Time's up, but even aficionados can be forgiven for not knowing that there even are any others besides Tchaikovsky's celebrated Mediterranean musical postcard, *Souvenir de Florence*.

The North Shore Chamber Music Festival served up Tchaikovsky's omnipresent chestnut as well as the rarely heard Grand Sextet in E flat major by his compatriot, Mikhail Glinka Wednesday night at the Village Presbyterian Church in Northbrook. Now in its third season, the festival, helmed by the husband-and-wife

team of violinist Vadim Gluzman and pianist Angela Yoffe, continues through Saturday.

Ironically, Glinka's sextet also was inspired by a sojourn to Italy. In 1832, Glinka was on an extended stay in Milan, where he attended several operas at La Scala and became infatuated with the pianist daughter of his Italian doctor, an amateur blessed with a sterling technique. Cast in three movements, the work departs from the usual doubled sextet forces, and is instead scored for piano, string quartet and double bass.

No great expressive depths are plumbed in this work, but Glinka's Grand Sextet is charming and effective with an attractive fount of infectious melody. The expansive opening Allegro offers an assertive main theme, which is dexterously worked out without losing an essential geniality.

The shade of Chopin looms prominently in the extended piano solo that begins the limpid Andante, contrasted with a folk-like Russian middle theme, which received fine solo violin playing by Ilya Kaler. The gamboling finale follows without a break, and while the working out doesn't always show much distinction or imagination, the sextet is consistently engaging, rounded off with an exhilarating coda.

One suspects there is more wit to be mined in the finale than was heard Wednesday, yet all the players (violinists Kaler and David Lakirovich, violist Rose Armbrust, cellist Ani Aznavoorian, and bass Timothy Cobb) provided full-tilt advocacy with William Wolfram's sparkling keyboard work the fulcrum of the performance.

Gluzman prefaced the performance of *Souvenir de Florence* by noting that his 1690 "ex Leopold Auer" Stradivari was the same violin played by Auer at the 1892 premiere of Tchaikovsky's sextet in its standard revised version.

Perhaps it was the power of suggestion after learning of the instrument's lineage, but there did seem to be an extra idiomatic flavor and edge to Wednesday's Tchaikovsky performance. Violin solos, in particular, seemed to take flight in Gluzman's hands, the silvery brilliance of his remarkable instrument offering an ideal blend of sweetness and sinew.

Yet the playing by the entire ensemble (violinists Gluzman and Lisa Shihoten, violists Atar Arad and Armbrust, and cellists Ani Aznavoorian and Mark Kosower [Cleveland Orchestra principal]) crackled with intensity. Textures can often sound agglutinated in this work yet the musicians' skillful balancing, aided by the superb acoustic, bracingly clarified individual lines.

One can go a long time without hearing *Souvenir de Florence* in as exciting and beautifully played a performance as this. The final bars were taken at a blistering pace, all six players managing somehow to hang on securely, closing the evening in thrilling fashion.

Two works by Prokofiev led off each half of the all-Russian program. Clarinetist Ilya Shterenberg's mordant, rich-toned clarinet characterfully brought out the febrile klezmer strains of the *Overture on Hebrew Themes*.

In his charming introduction, violist Arad told of how he was bored one night and simply decided "it would be cool" to arrange Prokofiev's piano *Toccata* for string sextet.

It's a decidedly odd choice for string retooling with Prokofiev's manic keyboard showpiece so inherently pianistic as to defy transposition. The result, while rather bizarre, is cleverly rendered by Arad and undeniably effective, receiving a bravura performance.

The North Shore Chamber Music Festival continues 7:30 p.m. Friday with Arvo Part's *Mozart-Adagio*, Weber's Clarinet Quintet and Schubert's "Trout" Quintet. nscmf.org; 847-370-3984.