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East Coast Chamber Orchestra, ECCO, at Seaport Museum

By David Patrick Stearns, January 10, 2011

“Playing was top-notch and personality was palpable. The music’s details were so vibrant that you could feel the effects even if intentions were obscure.”

The East Coast Chamber Orchestra, more commonly known as ECCO, is a sometime thing, but one so notable that **you always make a mental note not to miss this 18-member conductorless ensemble when it pops up**, usually every year when its young members take time out from their solo careers and major symphony orchestra positions. The Friday concert at the Independence Seaport Museum was as singular as the group's existence: **Playing was top-notch and personality was palpable.**

Conductorless orchestras maintain their cohesion by intensely listening to one another. Togetherness comes from the inside out, making certain kinds of freedom possible, but also interpretations without strong viewpoints due to compromises in democratic rehearsals. Not with this exuberant bunch, and certainly not in a program with *Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8 in C minor*, a string orchestra transcription - music that requires even deeper investigation than most of the composer's symphonies.

Written during a particularly low point in the composer's life when government censorship forced him to compose with covert, encrypted messages, the piece is full of enigmatic quotations as well as near-operatic gestures, one of which sounds like someone insistently pounding at a door, perhaps referring to a period when Shostakovich was so endangered that he kept a packed suitcase should he need to flee at a moment's notice. The central problem for non-Russian performers is parsing the less-obvious, under-the-surface meaning. However much that happened in rehearsals, **the music's details were so vibrant that you could feel effects even if intentions were obscure. Often, chamber orchestra adaptations of string quartets give up nuance in favor of extra sonic muscle. This performance had both.**

Other works in the concert (presented by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society) included *Janacek's Suite for String Orchestra*, an early work that sounds nothing like Janacek. Imagine Grieg's *Holberg Suite* with boundary issues (since there are hints of the soul-baring intimacy of Janacek's operas). Also, group member Michi Wiancko freely adapted Geminiani's *La Folia Variations* for string orchestra, exploiting strengths in all sections of the orchestra and bringing the program to a **dashing close.**

The major discovery was Ginastera's crunchy, action-packed 1965 *Concerto per Corde*, a piece that, like the Shostakovich, is an adaptation of the composer's own *String Quartet No. 2*. ECCO was miles away from the steamrolling string sound and rhythmic gravitas of the Philadelphia Orchestra, which premiered (and later recorded) the piece in 1966 under Eugene Ormandy. **Tempo were almost recklessly brisk in a work full of cadenza-like incidental solos** that make the piece strike out, somewhat wildly, in many directions - **played at**

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daring extremes that left your heart in your mouth. Potentially monotonous motor rhythms of the final movement in fact came off with **great cumulative effect**, in what is clearly a major work for this repertoire.

East Coast Chamber Orchestra