
Self-conducted A Far Cry at home in place, sound

By David Weininger

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It's always best to see a band on its home turf. For the conductorless string orchestra A Far Cry, home turf is Jamaica Plain, where the group can be seen practicing in its storefront rehearsal space on South Street. Or at St. John's Episcopal, a well-worn stone church a few blocks from the center of town, where A Far Cry gives a series of concerts each season.

Saturday's late-afternoon performance there had a different vibe from their concerts at other, more formal venues — this felt more like a neighborhood gathering. The audience was dressed casually and ranged widely in age, with a decent number of families. Typical of the concert's relaxed feel was an exchange where violinist Jesse Irons invited the audience to a post-concert reception; "We had it at intermission," came the response from the back of the room.

The church's moderately sized hall was full, suggesting that the bond between the ensemble and its environs is a mutual one. Listeners got to hear a program that opened with Gabriela Lena Frank's "Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout," a skillful blending of elements from Western classical and Peruvian folk traditions. Panpipes and flutes are evoked through an array of double stops, harmonics, and sharp, interlocking rhythms. A movement titled "Canto de Velorio" made the strongest impression; it portrays a mythical figure who was hired to sing at funerals to make them more sorrowful. Frank sketched her in music of deep anguish, using slides, pizzicatos, and angular melodic lines.

Joel Fan was the soloist for Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 11, in a version without wind parts. Despite playing on a less than stellar instrument, Fan played with eloquence and sensitivity, phrasing lines in a natural, unhurried way. The orchestra kept its part light and supple. Their rapport was clearest in the finale, in which the dialogues within the strings and between soloist and ensemble are more intricate than might at first appear.

Closing out the concert was Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings, drained of its familiar syrupy sound and played with freshness and transparency instead. It got off to a somewhat unsettled start, and there were a few tuning problems in the first movement. But the performance soon hit its groove, and the third-movement elegy had an understated sense of nostalgia, as well as some superb viola solos. A buoyant finale brought an ovation from the hometown crowd.

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