

Great Lakes fest off to strong start; so is Paul Watkins

Mark Stryker, *Detroit Free Press* 8:37 a.m. EDT June 23, 2015



(Photo: Great Lakes festival)

It hasn't taken long for new [artistic director Paul Watkins](#) to make an impact on the 22nd annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, which begins its second and final week of concerts on Tuesday.

In his maiden voyage, the Welsh-born cellist was everywhere during week one, appearing not only on his primary instrument but also as a conductor, pianist and harpsichordist. Meanwhile, Watkins' connections to the musical elite on both sides of the Atlantic revealed themselves in the festival debuts of some gifted musicians, as well as the extended presence of his colleagues in the Emerson String Quartet. And his savvy programming kept his imagination in the air even when he wasn't physically on stage.



In the five concerts I've attended so far, the consistency and level of artistry has, generally speaking, stretched beyond previous Great Lakes milestones. Here are four rewarding moments and ideas that encapsulate the festival so far.

■ In her Great Lakes debut, violinist Stephanie Gonley joined Watkins for a performance of Maurice Ravel's Sonata for Violin and Cello (1920) on Tuesday at St. Hugo's in Bloomfield Hills. The performance was remarkable for its rhythmic precision, expressive feeling and subtle gradations of color and dynamics. The piece is one of Ravel's most abstract works, with charm taking a backseat to a sinewy muscularity. Gonley and Watkins coated an aggressive attack — their pizzicato (plucked) notes were fierce — with an intense lyricism that flowered in phrase after phrase.

The authoritative playing of Gonley — a Brit who is the leader of the English Chamber Orchestra, a position analogous to the concertmaster in American symphonies — was a revelation. She is little known in America, but Watkins has worked with her extensively in the United Kingdom, and she deserves a far bigger profile in this country.

■ That same Tuesday concert included a new work, "Sabina," from "The Companion Guide to Rome" by Andrew Norman (b. 1979). Scored for violin, viola and cello, the piece was inspired by one of the composer's favorite Italian churches, and the music's evocative stillness suggested the morning sun showering through quiet empty pews.

Norman eschewed traditional melody in favor of barely audible whispers, shimmering tremolos, slippery glissandi, and clouds of simple chords and unisons that kept morphing as the three players slid between pitches in a kind of random yet controlled phasing.

Watkins was joined by Emerson players Eugene Drucker on violin and Lawrence Dutton on viola, and what was so terrific about the committed performance was hearing such gilded veterans working so hard on behalf of a composer who is 25 years younger (or more) than most of the Emersons.

■ "New Beginnings: Making Music in America" is the theme of this year's festival, and it was revealing to connect the dots between a number of the American works heard during the opening week — such as the gleaming sonorities, driving repetition, phase-shifting rhythms and grooves of minimalism in scores by Steve Reich and John Adams — and the way some of those ideas filtered down into works by the younger composers Norman and Christopher Cerrone.

There were emotional resonances too. America is an optimistic land, but much of our most memorable art is streaked with a uniquely plaintive melancholy and yearning nostalgia. You can feel it in the muted ballads of Miles Davis, the Americana of Aaron Copland, the photos of Walker Evans, the slashing abstractions of Franz Kline and the elegiac prose of Jack Kerouac.



A similar lyric art pervades Reich's "Different Trains" (1988), heard on Friday night at Ladder Company 12 in Detroit. An autobiographical masterpiece, the piece links Reich's memories of crisscrossing the country by rail as a boy in the early '40s with the trains in Europe transporting Jews to death camps. The pulsating music is scored for string quartet and a prerecorded tape of strings, train whistles and voices intoning spoken text in rhythmic speech patterns. The music conjures a tactile sound world of eloquent ghosts, nervous atmosphere and pensive elegy. It packs the emotional wallop of a beautiful nightmare.

The young Excelsa Quartet, part of the festival's Shouse training institute, took up the challenge of "Different Trains." It was a game performance but tentative, lacking the integrated rhythmic snap necessary for the work to truly soar. There was also an unfortunate technical glitch when at the end of the piece, the pre-recorded track started up again, breaking the spell of silence. Still, the fundamental power of the piece came across the footlights.

Adams' "Shaker Loops," heard in its string septet arrangement Friday morning at Kirk in the Hills in Bloomfield Hills, parlayed churning rhythms and stasis into a portrait of meditative and ecstatic religious rituals. But it too walked a line between melancholy and ecstasy. Wearing his conductor's hat, Watkins channeled the energy of his starry ensemble into a polished and focused performance that captured the trance-like spiritualism.

For the record, the ensemble included: Emerson violinist Phil Setzer, Gonley, Detroit Symphony concertmaster Yoonshin Song, Dutton, Los Angeles Philharmonic principal cellist Robert deMaine (formerly DSO principal), DSO cellist David LeDoux and DSO principal bassist Kevin Brown.

■ Finally, Friday's concert at Ladder Company 12, a former city fire station on Lafayette near Corktown that's being converted into a living-work space by private developers, proved to be a dynamic venue for "Different Trains" and Cerrone's "Memory Palace." The latter is a vibrant piece for solo homemade percussion instruments and real-time electronics played with virtuoso flair by Chris Sies. Like Norman, Cerrone (b. 1984) is a member of the Sleeping Giant composer collective.

With its base of operations in the suburbs, the Great Lakes festival has been slow to meaningfully connect with the city other than in the rarefied surroundings of the Detroit Institute of Arts and a one-off performance two years ago at Gallery 555. But here was a concert whose program of living composers seemed ideally suited to the urban surroundings. There was an energy in the space and rapport with the audience that was palpably more in tune with everyday life in Detroit than most classical music concerts. More, please.

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Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Continues through Sunday at venues across metro Detroit

Up Next: 7:30 p.m. Tue., Temple Beth El, Bloomfield Hills; 7:30 p.m. Wed., Kirk in the Hills, Bloomfield Hills. 248-559-2097. \$35; \$10, student