

Arts/Entertainment

Apple Hill launches MID season with an evening of fine playing

By JEFFRY STEELE
Special to The Recorder

DEERFIELD — New Hampshire's Apple Hill Chamber Players were the first performers in this season's Music in Deerfield series, held Friday at the Brick Church Meeting House in Old Deerfield.

The name of Apple Hill has been associated with fine chamber music since the inception — 20 years ago — of this performing ensemble as well as with the Apple Hill Summer Festival, where musicians of all ages go to practice the art of chamber music under the tutelage of these and other fine players. Their 1992 tour of the Middle East was featured in the documentary film "Playing for Peace," which has been broadcast on television worldwide.

As their touring ensemble includes two pianists, it was fitting that they opened the program with Dvorak's "Slavonic Dances" in the original piano four-hands version. The hands of Robbie Merfield and Eric Stumacher moved in perfect synchronization as they sat beside each other.

It was especially exciting to see them pounding in unison the syncopated fortissimo chords in the familiar A-flat dance. Although both players brought fine pianism to the music — with good variety and timbre — I felt they had not together developed the character and depth that either one of them might have given in a solo performance.

Never having heard Beethoven's Trio, Op. 1, No. 2, I was not drawn in until the second movement — made ethereal by Merfield's magic touch on the keyboard. Paul Cohen, cello, and Mowry Person, violin, played with the right mix of precision and expression to enhance the sense of inner peace implied by the music.

The Scherzo was a delightful mix of fun and intellect, with a rhythmic motif consisting of accented "3-1" (in the context of "1-2-3-1-2-3") that wouldn't quit. Merfield gave this a lilting rubato (in this case, a momentary slowing down) whenever he had this motif alone.

The stage, for those of you who have not attended this series, is assembled before each concert to raise the players above the wooden prayer stalls in which the main-floor audience is seated. This means that one listens from either below the performers, or above, in the balcony. Although the sound of the hall is excellent, this feature makes for some minor balance problems: seated in the balcony I heard a bit too much piano and seated downstairs I heard too little.

I had been wondering why the double bassist had made the trip, as he was scheduled only for one solo piece. It became clear, however, from the moment Rich-

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ard Hartshorne began the piece — "B.B. Wolf: An Apologia" — his essential role in the evening. Co-authored by him and Apple Hill resident composer Jon Deak, this "performance art" piece was a stitch, requiring Hartshorne to be almost as professional an actor as he is a bassist.

It was a comic fantasia on the word "Wolf," with a down-and-dirty "blues" section that I assume referred to bluesman "Howlin' Wolf." The piece closed with an evocative imitation of an actual wolf cry that would make Paul Winter jealous (and quite possible cause the hall to become surrounded by Franklin County wolves in search of a mate).

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I found myself wanting to hear the Andante slower, even though it was probably more "correct" at the tempo they had chosen. I also objected to the constant vibrato in both the violin and the cello in their renditions of the main melody — as the coloring of *selected* notes with vibrato was no longer available as an expressive device.

Betty Hauck, violist, gave the melody its most memorable reading; and her playing through was first rate.

Though they took the last movement at breathtaking pace, the playing was always clean. Many fine details were worked out in the fugue passages.

The remaining concerts on the Music in Deerfield series look to be of the highest caliber, bringing us some of the finest and most interesting artists available. I congratulate the organizers on their 15th season of making this gift available to our community.

Music review