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Copernicus concert ambitious, successful



Last month, the organizers of [Project Copernicus in Miami](#) sent me a recording of their Jan. 21 concert, and it's taken me a long time to get around to listening to it, what with the press of other business.

Finally, though, I've found some time, and I like what I hear.

This Miami-based chamber ensemble, which I've written about earlier this year, is trying to reach audiences by pursuing new music and collaborations with creators from other artistic disciplines. The Jan. 21 concert, titled *Hausmusik*, was recorded at Arts at St. Johns in Miami Beach and featured a song by Copernicus' [resident composer, Stephen Danyew](#), the Arnold Schoenberg arrangement of Debussy's *Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un faune*, and the Fourth Symphony of Gustav Mahler in Erwin Stein's 1921 reduction.

The Danyew work, *Soft Wind*, is a setting for soprano, tenor and chamber ensemble of a poem the composer wrote to commemorate the passing in October 2003 of his

grandfather. Danyew, a 23-year-old recent graduate of the University of Miami, isn't afraid to be lyrical, and *Soft Wind* is primarily a long, supple melodic line shared by the two voices amid a general mood of peace and quiet.

The music is of a piece with the melody-based strain of American composition exemplified by writers such as Samuel Barber and Ned Rorem, rich with feeling, the harmonies conservative and comforting. Soprano Monica Yunus and tenor Brandon McReynolds sounded fine, and declined to oversing at the climax just before the end. Danyew's song didn't have an especially distinctive profile, but it worked well for what it was intended to be: A heartfelt tribute to a beloved family member.

The Debussy that opened the concert demonstrated that Copernicus is made up of some first-rate musicians. Schoenberg's arrangement is beautifully done, attendant to Debussy's precise colors and a lovely work of art in itself. [Conductor Chung Park](#) led this work at a good tempo that kept the languor of the original without dragging, and the recording also indicates he paid strict attention to dynamics as well.

His interpretation had a satisfying shape, above all; it had a sense of narrative and arrival particularly important in this music, which falls apart under less scrupulous hands. There was standout playing as well from flutist Ebonee Thomas, oboist Rick Basehore — who has one of the fattest sounds I've heard in a long time — and pianist Zoe Zeniodi.

The Mahler Fourth that occupied the second half is perhaps the most accessible and traditional of this composer's symphonies. But although it doesn't ask for eight French horns like the Third or organs and choruses like the Eighth, it still has specific orchestral effects that are lost in a 12-person chamber version, skillful though Stein's is.

And yet, one of the pleasures of Mahler's writing is the contrapuntal clarity, even when he's going all-out in a huge orchestral peroration, so there are good reasons to appreciate this reduction on its own merits. Copernicus had some tuning and ensemble difficulties in the first two movements, which tend to sound like slightly weird salon orchestra pieces.

Part of this is the size of the ensemble, which is too small to make enough of an effect in the maximal moments, and part of it is the music itself, which to be most effective has to sound as though entire sections of the orchestra are in a state of near-collapse.

That's especially true of the second movement, which here lacked the sense of nervousness and hysteria that differentiates it from the relative calm of the other three movements. It could have used a bit more push, a little more bite, to make it work.

But the closing two movements were more effective. The serene slow movement, the emotional core of the work, showed off the Copernicus strings to good effect, and the music unfolded with a moving sense of bliss and repose. Soprano Yunus returned for a well-sung finale, in particular the final verse's paean to the aural delights of heaven (*Kein' Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden*).

This was an ambitious concert in every sense of the word, and while there were moments where things didn't go so well, Project Copernicus has every right to be pleased with this effort. According to its Website, the group is looking for a West Palm Beach venue for its May concerts, and that's good news. This is a venture that's well worth supporting.