

## Chamber musicians achieve oneness

By John Zeugner, Telegram & Gazette reviewer

This was a big weekend for “less is more in music” advocates. Saturday night at Tuckerman Hall, Music Worcester Inc. brought in L’Orchestre de Chambre Francais, a very lush-sounding group of 11 musicians led by Eugene Albulescu. At the same time the Worcester Chamber Music Society, an even smaller performing ensemble, performed at St. Paul’s church — a program repeated yesterday at the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton.

Next Saturday night, again at Tuckerman, Music Worcester will pitch yet more chamber music delicacies at the very receptive Worcester audiences by sponsoring Concertante, a chamber group featuring a program of sumptuous Dvorak and Brahms sextets. One can only celebrate such largess.

L’Orchestre de Chambre Francais is a young, polished ensemble of seven women and four men (six violins, two violas, two cellos, and one double bass — played, surprisingly, given the name of the outfit, with a German bow). Their opening piece was an “enhanced” version of Mozart’s early quartet in G, KV 156. To the logical, if

purist, question, just what is to be gained by doubling the viola and cello parts and tripling the violin and adding one bass mostly playing the cello line, came the immediate answer: a wondrously thickened and beguiling sound. By the second movement the group had moved well beyond early Mozartean parameters and was tiptoeing into Berlioz country, but the result was so magical and transformative that one could only sigh, “Yes, of course!”

That sound was perfect preparation for the next piece, Elgar’s lilting, romantic serenade in E minor, Op. 20. Albulescu’s meticulous attention to sound sheen, and careful articulation of lines made even the somewhat schmaltzy Largo convincing.

The range of Albulescu’s talent was on fuller display as he became the piano soloist and conductor in a rousing version of Haydn’s piano concerto in D. There were some integration difficulties in the opening movement, and for this reviewer, at least, the rather modern sound of the piano did not perfectly blend with the classical strains of the strings. But the precision and

dynamism of Albulescu’s playing carried all before it. After the intermission the group turned to 19th-century music beginning with Massenet’s “Prelude” to Act IV of his opera “La Vierge,” and proceeding through three movements of Camille Saint-Saens’ “Prelude” to his oratorio “Le Deluge.”

When acknowledging audience appreciation, Albulescu had a rather fey, reticent demeanor, but when conducting he clearly was in total command, eliciting from his musicians a wonderful, echoing dialog and interplay, especially in the Saint-Saens’ second movement, “Andate Sostenuto.”

*As the group moved through this French romantic music, questions about whether the size of the group etiolated the clean joys of chamber music simply melted away. Their sound achieved a oneness that magnified and locked down audience appreciation. For that very appreciative audience the group played an encore, Ravel’s well-known “Pavane.”*

# The Evening Standard

## QANTAS NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

September 12, 2005, Monday

### Expressive performance

Absolutely Albulescu.

Pianist Eugene Albulescu in concert with the NGC Wellington Sinfonia. Principal guest conductor James Sedares. Regent on Broadway, yesterday.

Eugene Albulescu was in expressive and expansive form for last night's feature concerto with the Wellington Sinfonia. Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 5 in E flat, known as the *Emperor*, could almost be called Albulescu's signature piece.

In 1985 it was this concerto that gained the young immigrant pianist, recently settled in Wellington from Romania, first place in the TVNZ Young Musician of the Year competition. Last night, he approached it like an old friend, fired with enthusiasm for its complexities, nuances and contrasting moods. It was tremendous playing. Along with the expected panache, authority and sensitivity, Albulescu brought a good humouredness to his performance, showing generous encouragement for and rapport with the orchestra. Under James Sedares, the Sinfonia proved equal to the task of keeping pace, managing the dignity, stateliness and liveliness of the piece with aplomb. When, all too soon, it was over, a delighted audience was wholehearted in its congratulations for both.

The Sinfonia had warmed up for Albulescu with a rendition of Dvorak's spritely Carnival Overture, which was a little loose in places but helped set the tone for the music to come. Buoyed by its success with Albulescu, the orchestra's cohesiveness and control was further showcased in the demanding Shostakovich Symphony No 5. All sections combined well -- the strings and woodwind especially -- and the strings effectively sustained the melancholy of the third movement before the bravado of the fourth. Again, there was effusive appreciation for an engaging, well-pitched and satisfying performance.

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## Concert FM

Concert FM Transcript  
Review by Peter Mechen on Concert FM,  
Monday 12th September, 2005

### NGC Wellington Sinfonia Concert "Absolutely Albuiescu" Wellington Town Hall, Friday, 9th September, 2005

Eugene Albuiescu (piano)  
James Sedares (conductor)  
NGC Wellington Sinfonia  
DVORAK - "Carnival" Overture  
BEETHOVEN - Piano Concerto No. 5 "Emperor"  
SHOSTAKOVICH - Symphony No. 5

Full marks to the Wellington Sinfonia for two wonderfully stimulating and musically satisfying 2005 subscription concerts, the second of which we in Wellington heard on Friday September 9th in the Town Hall. Naturally enough much of the concert's interest was centred upon the return to Wellington of pianist Eugene Albuiescu, playing one of the great concertos - in fact Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto was the same work with which Albuiescu made his professional debut at the age of fifteen, twenty years earlier. But with Dvorak's "Carnival" Overture setting the evening alight with a burst of musical incandescence, and Shostakovich's mighty, enigmatic Fifth Symphony dominating the concert's second half, the Beethoven Concerto was well matched regarding both substance and performance.

Beginning the concert was the Dvorak Overture - and the performance was a riot of colour and movement, the orchestra giving us playing of tremendous élan and attack. It was the kind of playing which reminded me of what really constitutes a musical performance - one can have a crack orchestra with seemingly limitless tonal resources brilliantly skating over the surface of the music, dotting every t and crossing every i, and hardly bothering with the music's real substance - or one can have a performance where the players are working as if their lives depended on the outcome, engaging with the notes and digging into those rhythms, and bringing it all to life. It was the latter kind of performance that we got from James Sedares and the Sinfonia. The orchestra's smallish string numbers meant that the wind and brass counterpoints and harmonic voices came out more clearly than is usually the case - and what playing those sections gave us! As well, I must confess to being fascinated with the skill of the Sinfonia's percussion department, the tambourine player in particular being a joy to watch, as he used various bodily protruberances to activate his instrument and produce a variety of sounds.

So, the stage was set for Eugene Albuiescu's appearance - I had not heard him play "live" for almost fifteen years. Here, all impulses to "master" or "possess" the music and instrument were instead put towards expressing a spontaneous joy and exuberance in the music-making that made the concerto sound fresh and newly-minted. It was an approach which shifted the music's emotional weight away from the realms of heroic determination and profound utterance, and imparted a more playful and high-spirited feeling to the energetic passages, from which the slow movement became a kind of sylvan retreat, its lighter-than-usual touch less "Germanic" than "Hellenic", with more sunshine and play of light upon moving surfaces than is sometimes expressed.

The orchestral playing was a joy - robust and full-throated throughout the first movement, capturing that stride, that sense of purposeful gait which gives the music its irresistible momentum throughout all the work's different episodes. One of the things that struck me about Albuiescu was that, from where I was sitting out front, he seemed to have his back turned partly towards me for much of the time - and this was because of his active involvement with what the orchestral players were doing. He was looking at them and listening intently while not playing, and often seemed to be making chamber music with them. This had the effect of the concerto being not so much a duel between warring combatants but a partnership, a musical synthesis of purpose, the battles already won and the heroes proudly parading and proclaiming their purpose to joyous and festive effect.

Such an approach in no way precluded excitement when called for - the pianist's midway exchange of thunderous chords with the full orchestra, and those canonic octave see-sawings in tandem with the strings which followed, had tremendous élan and a sinewy strength which laid the foundation for the build-up towards the reprise of the concerto's opening. And what volcanic pianistic eruptions were sparked off from Albuiescu in response to those mighty orchestral shouts! It was no surprise when, at the movement's end, the audience broke into spontaneous applause - it just couldn't be helped! After a slow movement remarkable for its expression of beauty and grace in gentle movement, the finale was announced confidently and firmly, a spontaneous impulse of delight indicating a new direction, but one in accordance with what had gone before - not a kind of breaking out from confines of close communion, but a flowering into the warmth of a day. Throughout the finale there was plenty of stumbling warmth from all concerned, the pianist and orchestra testing each other's mettle before reaching a lovely, glowing, satisfying concord - a great rapport between pianist and timpanist right at the end. It was a tribute to Albuiescu, Sedares and the players, that one didn't come away from the performance thinking how brilliant it had all been first and foremost - rather the abiding impression was one of an enjoyable and richly-voiced music-making experience shared with the listeners by a group of highly talented musicians.

After the interval came the Shostakovich Fifth Symphony - "a Soviet Artist's reply to just criticism" - a work which has divided commentators as to the extent to which Shostakovich capitulated towards the wishes of the ruling powers for "accessible proletarian music". It's a work whose utterances are among the most equivocal in all symphonic literature - does one take the heroic aspects of the symphony at face value, or was the composer working from an ironic standpoint, investing a kind of subplot with desperation, humour and savagery? For me those brutal bass drum beats added to the final peroration sum up the work's feeling - "...we are not humbled! We continue to suffer, but remain defiant!" .....

