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Festival showcases local talent

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When it comes to classical music, Rhode Island has produced more talent than most of us realize. Many of the players who got their start in high school bands and youth orchestras have gone on to jobs with ensembles across the country.

But last night, about a dozen of those far-flung performers returned home to kick off a 10-day chamber festival showcasing Rhode Island-bred talent. The event was held at the Federal Reserve, the former restaurant on Dorrance Street in Providence.

Truth be told, not all the players in the festival are Rhode Islanders. A few spouses have been included along with good friends from music school and orchestra gigs.

But by and large, this was a night to welcome home some of the state's best and brightest, players such as Roland Pandolfi, who was for 35 years principal horn with the St. Louis Symphony and who now teaches at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio.

The festival has taken the name of the old Music on the Hill series in East Greenwich, which recently disbanded.

The evening's program offered a sampling of things to come, excerpts from pieces that will be heard in their entirety in the coming days in venues in Providence and the West Bay, snippets by Mozart, Gershwin, Cole Porter, and a jazzy suite by Morton Gould dedicated to clarinetist Benny Goodman.

Actually, the event was as much party as it was concert. Concertgoers showed up about 6 p.m. and spent the next hour or so socializing, while munching on appetizers and sipping complimentary cosmopolitans. Then it was time to gather around a makeshift stage for about 75 minutes of music. Dessert and coffee followed.

Saturday's concert at St. Luke's Church, in East Greenwich, follows a similar format, one designed to attract those who don't normally attend classical concerts.

The three remaining concerts are more traditional in nature.

The casual atmosphere last night seemed like the smart way to go for a summer festival, although I'm sure organizers were hoping for a bigger crowd.

Those who did attend, though, seemed to go for the mix of hardcore classics and lighter fare, such as the sassy arrangement of Porter's *Begin the Beguine*. That was arranged by jazz violinist Even Price, who will be on hand for concerts next week.

On the other hand, I missed the chance to sink my teeth into at least one blockbuster, perhaps a complete Beethoven quartet or Brahms trio. As it turned out, some of the opening numbers were pretty uneventful, such as the sleepy Carl Nielsen *Serenata Invano*, which depicts a group of musicians serenading a young beauty to no avail.

The two Mozart offerings, a couple of movements from the Flute Quartet in A Major and the final movement of the Oboe Quartet in F Major, provided some of the most rewarding moments. Although violist Suzanne LeFevre and clarinetist Daniel Gilbert nailed an intriguing, angular 1942 *Allegro* by British composer Rebecca Clarke.

This was largely an evening of ensemble playing that provided little chance for soloists to shine, even though oboist Anne Gabriele had her moments in the Mozart, and clarinetist Gilbert was terrific in four fleeting movements from Gould's swinging *Benny's Gig*. He was ably backed up on string bass by the festival's artistic director, John Mark Pellegrino.

The festival continues tonight at 7 at the First Baptist Church in America, 75 North Main St., Providence. A set of variations for flute and piano by Rhode Island composer Sebastian Currier will be featured.