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Yesterday at 2:41 p.m. EST

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The 21st Century Consort performed its program "Igor and Coco" at the Hirshhorn Museum's Ring Auditorium on Saturday afternoon. (H. Paul Moon)

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Review by [Michael Andor Brodeur](#)

On Saturday afternoon, the 21st Century Consort filled the Ring Auditorium for a twofold celebration inspired by a curious pairing. With a program titled “Igor and Coco” — i.e. Stravinsky and Chanel — the consort sought to mark its 50th season in tandem with the golden anniversary of its host museum, the Hirshhorn. (The current exhibition “Revolutions: Art from the Hirshhorn Collection, 1860-1960” is its own birthday party.)

The two namesake anchors of the program were substantial: The premiere of Scott Wheeler’s artfully crafted song cycle “A Woman of Her Time: Coco Chanel Sings” in the first half was balanced by a boisterous four-handed piano performance of Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring” by Audrey Andrist and Lisa Emenheiser.

But the spiritual presence of Igor and Coco — born a year apart in Russia and France, respectively, and passing within three months of each other in 1971 — also lent to the evening a certain flair, a fizzy mixture of daring ambition and effortless style. Both of which animated the evening's companion pieces: a duo for marimba and bass clarinet by the contemporary composer Mikhail Johnson, and another for violin and piano by Coco's Parisian milieu-mate, Lili Boulanger.

Johnson's "Ton yo han mek fashan" opened the night with a squawk and a trill, the work of Paul Cigan on bass clarinet and Lee Hinkle on marimba. Over the following 13 minutes, Cigan and Hinkle would be in rapt conversation, the clarinet digging earthen low notes and sounding snarling calls that could have come from the treetops. Johnson's selection of instruments refers back to the Mento bands of his native Jamaica, with Hinkle's marimba evoking the rumba box or marimbula, described in the program as similar to "a large thumb piano."

Hinkle's light and lithe touch yielded bouncy rhythms with a radiant timbral glow (like a steel drum at a great distance), a perfectly odd coupling to Cigan's burly warbles. It was exciting listening to the two instruments find different ways to relate and transform — as when Hinkle doubled his mallets with a pair of shakers, an unexpectedly evocative rhythm section appearing from nowhere. This was the second chance I've had to hear the consort present work by Johnson (like all of their performances, January's "Singular Beauty" program is available to watch on YouTube), and, frankly, I'm hooked.

Wheeler's sweeping suite on the life of fashion designer Coco Chanel was eruditely composed and splendidly executed by the expanded consort ensemble — a pleasure from beginning to end. Soprano Katherine Lerner Lee lent Chanel enough wry edge and dry humor to light up Wheeler's many one- and two-liners. (e.g., "Money is like the sky: pure possibility.") While not transposed directly from Chanel's own quotes, the words are largely inspired by her, and elegantly refined by Wheeler.

Musically, the sequence is largely constructed around a core string trio, which sometimes evokes the cadence of Lerner Lee's speech and other times takes sudden romantic detours. Memories of the poverty of the designer's "country girl" past as Gabrielle Chanel are gilded with luxurious harmonies that seem to wrap around you like a shawl. At one point, the beauty of it all takes Chanel aback, and she interrupts her own performance: "I thought this was a concert of modern music!"

But ultimately, Chanel's is a story of the pursuit of love, beauty and truth despite the vicissitudes of style, or, as she puts it, "Who wants the ennui of an avant garde play?/ I'd rather stay at home and serve my boy a nice cabernet."

A pulse of nervous piano introduced Boulanger's "D'un matin de printemps," a 1917 tone poem here concentrated from its orchestral arrangement into a searing duo, lushly realized by Emenheiser and violinist Irina Muresanu. A clobbering bed of piano provided a landscape for fanciful, leaping lines of violin, electrically played by Muresanu.

The monumental closer — the four-handed “Rite” — was made more so by the appearance of an overhead screen displaying a live feed from a camera suspended over the keyboard. The music was familiarly feral, but an extra dimension of fascination was added with the focus shifted to the four hands of Andrist and Emenheiser — or five, if you counted occasional manual cameos from consort manager and part-time page-turner Boyd Sarratt.

## Style section

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In the context of the evening’s fashion-forward themes, listening to the performance was like examining a pen-and-ink sketch of a couture gown. But watching the two women play the piece also dismantled any presumption of some sensible split — e.g., I play the highs and you take the lows. If anything, the wild spring winds seemed to toss their hands around the piano. Sometimes they parted ways down the keyboard to articulate familiar figures from the woodwinds; sometimes they threatened to collide, or danced around each other with intricate fingerwork.

Especially satisfying (and quite surprising) was the variety of sonorities they pulled from the piano. (At one point, I could swear I heard someone impossibly whistling along, but it was just a particularly beaming

resonance.)

The four-hander version was also richly revealing: I didn’t know it was possible for the “Rite” to show its vulnerability, so exposed to the elements. Even still, its intensity remained intact; everything was sacrificed but nothing was spared. I was reminded of Chanel’s enduring advice to remove one thing before leaving the house. Stripping away decoration makes for a smarter look, sure, but it’s also a way of getting closer to the truth — and that never goes out of style.