



Narek Arutyunian, *clarinetist*

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Review: Huntington Estate Festival 2012 (November 21-25)

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Music, wine and conversation flow freely at Mudjee's Mecca of chamber music.

A toast: to getting sloshed in the name of investigative journalism. I've just returned from four days of being serenaded, dined and thoroughly wine'd at Musica Viva's Huntington Estate Music Festival. It'll be another four days hence before I can get Dvořák's A-Major Piano Quintet out of my head... And that's not the Shiraz talking.

The robust, exotic wine would have to be Armenian clarinetist Narek Arutyunian. Alone onstage, with compact build, he packed an unexpected punch in short bursts of startling virtuosity, yanking audiences out of Beethovenian gentility with a six-minute *Spanish Caprice* by Ivan Olenchik that proved a crowd favorite. In the Weber clarinet quintet, Narek's beautifully rounded tone blended well with the burnished, penetrating sound of the Australian String Quartet's four Guadagninis. And still this young firebrand's personality came surging the scales, every gesture poised yet charged with dramatic flair - in his hands, Weber sounded refreshingly like Gershwin at times.

One of the great pleasures of Huntington is to be able to chat informally with the musicians over a meal and a glass of the house specialty. After a few dozen stunned concertgoers had formed a bee-line to shake his hand, Narek conversed jovially with Steinway expert Ara Vartoukian in their native tongue. It was a surprise how daring Narek was onstage, yet how softly-spoken off. At only 20 years old and stressing out between concerts about his finals at Juilliard, just imagine the kind of virtuoso we'll have when the wine has matured. A real discovery and a credit to Musica Viva's scouting.