

Preview

Arts Renaissance Tremont: Men Who Don't Bite (bassoon quartet)

by Mike Telin



Having your instrument of choice referred to as the *clown of the orchestra* is a burden bassoonists around the world have to bear every day. Many players find this label to be an unfair assessment that does not begin to represent the important role their instrument plays in the orchestral canon — what would the opening of *Rite of Spring* sound like had it been written for tenor saxophone? And in order to debunk the label, many bassoonists have formed quartets and work tirelessly to promote the instrument's many lyrical qualities.

“We’re just trying to play music that shows the bassoon as a multi-faceted, expressive instrument,” says Cleveland Orchestra assistant principal bassoonist Barrick Stees. Following in the footsteps of esteemed ensembles such as the *Bubonic Bassoon Quartet* and *Bassoon Brothers*, Stees will be joined by bassoon mates Eric Stomberg (University of Kansas), Jonathan Sherwin (The Cleveland Orchestra) and George Sakakeeny (Oberlin Conservatory) when *Men Who Don’t Bite (Bassoon Quartet)* perform a concert on Sunday, February 17 beginning at 3:00 pm in Pilgrim Congregational Church as part of the Arts Renaissance Tremont series.

A special, free preview performance at the Happy Dog will be given at noon on Friday, February 15. The concerts feature music by Gesualdo, Schubert, Debussy, Tchaikovsky and Schickele. The program also includes individual performances by members of the quartet with Oberlin Conservatory faculty pianist, James Howsmon.

According to George Sakakeeny, Stees is totally responsible for the group's name. “I deny any ownership of that title but I do kind of like it. (Our bite isn’t as bad as our bark).” But Stees remembers things this way: “We were just rehearsing and George looked up and said that it’s so nice to look around and see everybody with good embouchures. And since we hadn’t named our group yet I said we’re not biting the reed, so that’s how we got the name *Men Who Don’t Bite*.”

The quartet first came together to make a recording with Eric Stomberg of the two quartets by Victor Bruns. “We didn’t really need a name because we didn’t know we would

ever do anything together again,” said Sakakeeny. “Then we played a concert and then another so we decided that we needed to come up with a name.”

Another interesting fact about the quartet is that in addition to their last names all beginning with the letter S, Stees, Sherwin and Sakakeeny all studied with David Van Hoesen at the Eastman School of Music and for one year were all in the same studio. And while Eric Stomberg studied at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music with William Winstead, his last name also begins with S, and he did study with Van Hoesen at the Sarasota Music Festival. Stees says that Van Hoesen’s teaching certainly has a lot to do with their relaxed embouchures, “He played on fairly light reeds and so do we, so you need to be fairly loose and relaxed in order to get the most out of them.”

Regarding the program, Stees says that it's hard to find “serious” pieces for bassoon quartet. “There is plenty of entertaining and humorous music, and there are a lot of groups that do that.”

In case you have to miss the performances, *Men Who Don't Bite* are available for weddings, bar mitzvahs and teething parties.

The Program:

Gesualdo: *Madrigals and Responses* (arranged by Barrick Stees) Since Gesualdo wrote for five or six voices The Men will be joined by two Oberlin students.

Schubert: *Trout Variations* (arranged by Eric Stomberg)

Tchaikovsky: *Andante Cantabile from String Quartet #1 in D major op. 11* (arranged by George Sakakeeny)

Debussy: *Quartet Movement* (arranged by Eric Stomberg)

Schickele: *Blue Set #2*

- Bassooner or Later
- Portlandia in Cerulean
- Gang of Wolves

The solo pieces are:

Dutilleux: *Saraband and Cortege* (George Sakakeeny)

Bernaudo: *Hallucinations* (Eric Stomberg)

De Falla: *Three Popular Spanish Songs* (Barrick Stees)

Kovacs: *Hommage to de Falla* (arranged and performed by Barrick Stees)

Douglas: *Lyric Suite* (Jonathan Sherwin)

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