

Review

Tuesday Musical: Béla Fleck & Brooklyn Rider at E.J. Thomas Hall (November 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck and the plucky young string quartet called Brooklyn Rider (Johnny Gandelsman & Colin Jacobsen, violins, Nicholas Cords, viola, and Eric Jacobsen, cello) launched their current, multi-city tour on Tuesday evening, November 12 at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron under the auspices of the Tuesday Musical Association, who had earlier sponsored Brooklyn

Rider on its Fuze! series at the Akron Art Museum.

Béla Fleck has long been known for his experiments in bringing the voice of the banjo into jazz, rock and other genres of music. The impetus for connecting these five outstanding musicians came directly from Fleck's initial foray into classical composition (it was in the stars apparently, since his parents named him Béla Anton Leoš— after Bartók, Webern and Janáček, respectively). After premiering his banjo concerto, *The Imposter*, with the Nashville Symphony in September of 2011 (he also played it last season with The Cleveland Orchestra), Fleck had the opportunity to record the work for Deutsche Grammophon, but needed something else to fill out the album.

He eventually decided to write a quintet for string quartet and banjo and was put in touch with Brooklyn Rider by a manager at Opus 3, a collaboration that resulted both in *Night Flight Over Water* and a joint tour.

The new work, which ended the program on Tuesday, is a newborn, having been premiered only in mid-October. Swooping strings introduce a kind of Morse Code section by the banjo that leads into a quasi-fugue and a slow section for solo banjo. Picking up speed again, the piece ends in a flurry of unison lines that the five players locked into with amazing precision.

An even newer work, as yet without a title, came earlier in the program. Fleck noted that this would be its premiere. "That means lots of mistakes," he quipped, inviting the audience to christen the piece by calling out possible names ("Akronism" was an apt suggestion).

Cyclic in that some of its musical material comes around again, the new piece shares some of the conceptual issues these ears had already heard in the concerto — and in *Night Flight* earlier in the program: plenty of great and intriguing ideas are spun out but not really developed, which gives the pieces an episodic quality, and the forms generally fall into a pattern of alternation between banjo and orchestra (or string quartet) without much attempt at synthesizing the two or giving the banjo a coloristic role to play in the ensemble.

The new piece also drew heavily on bluegrass idioms — nothing wrong with that, except when the music began to sound remarkably like an atonal take on *Turkey in the Straw*.

The performances, if not the pieces themselves, were assured and compelling. Shorter tunes arranged by Brooklyn Rider's Colin Jacobsen for banjo and quartet from the Fleck-tones repertoire like *Next* and *The Landing* that opened the show had far greater cohesion and character. But long pieces are difficult to control — something which many "cross-over" composers have discovered.

Brooklyn Rider was featured as a quartet in Lev 'Ljova' Zhurbin's *Culai*, a Romanian Gypsy-inspired extravaganza that showed off both the quartet's virtuosity and its ethnic chops to fine advantage.

Béla Fleck, whose fame undoubtedly was the big draw for the large audience, contributed some fine solo numbers, including an improvisation that managed to incorporate a Baroque toccata and courante as well as *Pop Goes the Weasel*, a quiet tune inspired by a new baby in the house, and a solo excerpt from the banjo concerto.

A lengthy encore — somewhat in the style of *Culai* — brought the more than 2-1/2 hour program to a thrilling end. It was a fine evening of music, but perhaps less is more. Being the astute musicians they are, Béla Fleck and Brooklyn Rider will figure that out as the tour progresses.

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