

Preview

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Imani Winds with pianist Gilbert Kalish on February 9

by Daniel Hautzinger



“It’s just badass,” said Imani Winds bassoonist Monica Ellis about Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, which Imani will perform on February 9 in Oberlin’s Finney Chapel as part of the ensemble’s concert on the Artist Recital Series. “It’s this huge iconic piece that’s been pared down to a quintet, which is crazy in and of itself. Behind all that is this crazy cool rhythmic action, melodic action.”

All that “crazy cool rhythmic action” is one thing that connects *The Rite of Spring* to much of Imani’s repertoire. In addition to Ellis, the quintet consists of oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, clarinetist Mariam Adam, flutist Valerie Coleman, and French hornist Jeff Scott. They often perform works from outside the traditional classical repertoire, especially focusing on African-American and Latin composers. “We’re attracted to this music because it’s close to us, it has soulful qualities, it’s ‘jazzy.’ It has a story behind it. Things that have a backbeat, a driving rhythm, are fun to play.”

Sunday’s concert program is in some ways an overview of Imani’s repertoire. It includes traditional classical music in the form of Poulenc’s *Sextet*, for which they will be joined by pianist Gilbert Kalish, as well as work by Scott and Coleman, both of whom are accomplished composers. Jazz and Latin composers are represented by jazz pianist Jason Moran’s *Cane*, written for Imani, and Astor Piazzolla’s *Libertango*. Finally, *The Rite of Spring* demonstrates Imani’s commercial success: their recording of it was included on iTunes Best of 2013 list.

Moran is one of many jazz musicians who have collaborated with Imani. They have also played works by pianist Danilo Perez, clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera, and legendary saxophonist Wayne Shorter, even appearing on Shorter’s latest album in a twenty minute piece by him with his quartet. “It was pretty phenomenal to work with Wayne, a dream come true,” Ellis said. “Paquito, we’ve known for many years, and he’s just been a mentor to us, believing in us. These big-time musicians become that way by always searching for what’s the next thing. They never are satisfied, they don’t rest on their laurels. That’s what makes it so much fun and inspiring and quite an honor to be in the same circle as those folks.”

Another part of the appeal in working with jazz musicians is that “classical composers oftentimes think that it’s too dang-gone hard to write for a quintet because the instruments are vastly different,” Ellis said. “You really don’t have that connotation with jazz composers. They just think, ‘wow, this is a cool instrumentation, let me see what I can work out.’”

Like their jazz collaborators, Imani are not afraid to improvise, though they would never call themselves jazz musicians. In *Libertango*, for instance, “the upper three instruments take straight-up solos,” Ellis said. Nor does improvisation necessarily conflict with classical tradition. “The written page can only get you so far. Sometimes improvisation might be as simple as a reinterpretation of something, whether it’s a rephrasing or a different way of playing what’s written down. We often say that if Bach were alive today, he would be a jazz musician. In his time the realization of figured bass lines was very extensive and flowery and full of improvisation.”

Bach gets to interact with jazz in an upcoming project, Scott’s *Passion for Bach and Coltrane*, scored for Imani, string quartet, jazz trio, and orator. “It’s the story of what might have happened if Bach and Coltrane had met,” Ellis said. When they tour with it, the orator will be A.B. Spellman, whose poems about music, religion, and mortality inspired the work and who is also Spellman-Diaz’s father. The seven-movement, 45-minute piece is just another instance of Imani pushing the boundaries of the traditional wind quintet past the often insular sphere of traditional classical music to explore the wide, multicultural world we live in today.

Published on clevelandclassical.com February 4, 2014