

Review**Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Imani Winds
with Gilbert Kalish (February 9)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Downsizing seems to be one of the buzz concepts of our era, but the ever-game-for-a-challenge Imani Winds took the idea to a new level of miniaturization on Sunday afternoon in Oberlin's Finney Chapel, when that excellent woodwind quintet, performing on the Artist Recital Series, impressed the sox off a good-sized audience with their ear-boggling performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in an arrangement by Jonathan Russell.

Well, OK, not the *whole* piece, but Russell gives the quintet a good twenty-minutes worth of Stravinsky's score redeployed for flute (and piccolo), oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon, and it worked. In her introduction, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz noted that the audience would be able to hear inner details that had heretofore been "covered up by loud percussion and obnoxious brass — you know who you are!" she joked to the balconies where some of those blushing conservatory offenders were sure to be found.

The Rite was a formidable endurance test for five wind players, but what impressed more than the sheer stamina of flutist Valerie Colman, oboist Spellman-Diaz, clarinetist Mariam Adam, hornist Jeff Scott and bassoonist Monica Ellis was the vast range of colors and the many subtle effects the players were able to bring to the score. Scott and Ellis contributed particularly amazing solo moments. Very little of the essence of the piece went missing.

Stravinsky came fifth on Imani's program of six pieces, which began with Jeff Scott's *Startin' Sumthin*, an energetic overture that raised the curtain with jumpy motives and colorful chords and gave Imani its first opportunity to impress both with the individual prowess of its members and its collective ensemble and blend.

After noting that two of the group — Spellman-Diaz and Ellis — were Oberlin alumnae enjoying a homecoming to the Conservatory that afternoon, Imani continued with

MacArthur fellow and jazz pianist Jason Moran's *Cane*, a suite of pieces chronicling the narratives of slaves (later freed, like Marie-Thérèse Métoyer) whose lives had taken them through the Cane River area of Louisiana. The rather diffuse first movement led on to three more whose musical direction became increasingly focused and coherent, though all four mini-tone poems were lyrical and pleasant to listen to.

Veteran pianist Gilbert Kalish joined Imani for two wind-and-piano classics, Poulenc's *Sextet* and Mozart's *Quintet*. Brash and sassy at the beginning, the Poulenc finds the composer with his thumb firmly planted next his nose as he taunts the Parisian musical establishment with his bad boy antics. Later, he turns cabaret-maudlin then festive with a side-trip through Montmartre, finally ending as Poulenc so often does, with a lyrical and semi-contrite denouement. Imani and Kalish played it with relish and panache.

The Mozart replaced a trio composed by Valerie Coleman, and gave Imani the opportunity to center themselves in a well-behaved Viennese classical piece between Poulenc and Stravinsky. The four winds (the flute sat this one out) played it with lean, bright tone and Kalish adorned it with crystalline runs. The piece might have profited from another rehearsal to more sharply hone its details.

The concert ended, as so many do these days, with Piazzolla: the nuevo tango master's *Libertango*, in a spiffy arrangement by Jeff Scott that gave several musicians important solo licks during a slow section and sent a happy audience out among the snowbanks probably wanting more but wary of putting Imani's seemingly indefatigable chops through an encore,

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