

## Gruca White Ensemble at Bop Stop (April 18)

by Jane Berkner



The Gruca White Ensemble must have a special connection to the number 100. Their formation as a flute and guitar duo dates back to 2013, when they played an hour-long concert on WCLV as a part of The Music Settlement's Centennial Celebration. Then, at the duo's concert on Saturday night, April 18, Bop Stop manager Gabe Pollack told the audience that we were attending the 100th performance hosted by The Music Settlement at the facility. Linda White and Robert Gruca became Artists in Residence at The Music Settlement in 2014, and their

concert this weekend showcased their appealing collaboration.

The particular strength of the ensemble lies in their diverse programming. Saturday's concert included standard classical repertoire for the two instruments, along with the duo's own arrangements of jazz, rock and funk tunes. There were also three short improvisational works interjected at various places in the evening's printed program. Referring to them as "impromptus," the two players gave themselves up to whatever flights of fancy they felt in the moment, allowing the music to develop as they went. In the process, both of these fine musicians responded to and built on the motivic material being played by the other.

The concert began with a fiery performance of a Milonga by Fernando Carlos Tavolaro, followed by Maria Castlenuovo-Tedesco's *Sonatina*. Though the *Sonatina* was well-

played, the tempos often seemed overly animated, which left little room for musical shading and subtlety in this jewel of the flute-guitar repertoire.

The first movement of Sébastien Vachez's *La ballade d'Irina* was a guitar solo. Gruca is a strong guitarist with ample technique, and it was nice to hear him reaching for more nuance, creating a varied sound palette in this opening solo. As if conjured by his lovely use of color, the pinks and reds of a beautiful sunset over Lake Erie came streaming through the windows of the Bop Stop while he played, creating a colorful visual atmosphere in the room. The duo exhibited strong ensemble playing in the last movement, "Danse du Retour."

White's flute playing was always sweet and clear. Her technique was constantly secure, and her artistry on display as she navigated through the music, creating long and liquid lines. Both she and Gruca kept the audience at ease, speaking about the works in a charming and affable style. As they introduced the last piece on the first half, a medley of funk tunes by Bill Withers, they said that Withers was being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame during that same evening, but admitted to not having known that when they programmed the arrangement. White brought terrific energy to the medley with the use of extended and beat-boxing flute techniques.

In the second half of the program, the duo introduced a new piece by a favorite composer, Elisenda Fabregas. The most harmonically progressive piece on this varied program, "Goyescas" depicts a different painting by Spanish romantic artist Francisco de Goya in each of its seven movements. It was a nice touch that slides of the paintings were projected onto the wall behind the stage, along with descriptions and translations of the movement titles.

Arrangements of tunes by Horace Silver came next. His jazz ballad "Peace" presented the opportunity for some sumptuous playing by both members of the duo. "Nica's Dream," a Latin-based tune, is quite thorny and thick harmonically. There is a challenge in its successful adaptation to the guitar, an instrument where there is often a noticeable lack of bass. It makes one wonder what the duo would sound like with the addition of a bassist.

Concluding the program was the ethnically inspired work "Four Macedonian Pieces" by Miroslav Tadic. White played the alto flute on one movement, producing a dark and gorgeous sound.

It's a bold move to bring an audience into one's spontaneous compositional framework. Hearing their impromptus and listening to this duo stretch out into new and interesting styles was like witnessing the planting of musical seeds. It will be interesting to continue listening to the Gruca White Ensemble to see how these seeds grow. Here's hoping for at least 100 more performances.

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