

Tuesday Musical: a conversation with Imani Winds bassoonist Monica Ellis

by Mike Telin



In today's classical music world, there are many ways to define the term "modern music," with all its cross-pollinations of styles and genres," Imani Winds bassoonist Monica Ellis said during a recent telephone interview. "I think this program has an overriding commonality of modernism, yet that is expressed in so many different ways."

On Wednesday, January 25 at 7:30 pm, the Imani Winds — Valerie Coleman, flute, Toyin Spellman-Diaz, oboe, Mark Dover, clarinet, Jeff Scott, horn, and Monica Ellis, bassoon — will return to the Tuesday Musical series in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall for a concert titled "Considered Modern." The program will feature works by Elliott Carter, Paquito D'Rivera, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Simon Shaheen, and Imani's own Valerie Coleman and Jeff Scott. This writer will conduct a pre-concert interview with members of the ensemble beginning at 6:30 pm.

"The program also embodies who we are as an ensemble, and the mission we established when the group was formed 20 years ago," Ellis said. "'Considered Modern' celebrates Valerie's and Jeff's music, some of the composers we have commissioned, and a little something in between. Historically, we had not titled our programs, but we realized they are not just a collection of pieces that we like. There is a purpose behind the works we put together. All of the composers represented on this program are from a modern, or post-modern ilk."

A recent addition to Imani's repertoire is Ruth Crawford Seeger's 1952 *Suite for Wind Quintet*, a piece that was introduced to them through contacts at the

University of Chicago, where they serve as ensemble-in-residence. The group will perform it for the first time this weekend in Chicago before bringing it to Akron.

“Seeger’s a fascinating composer, and although not considered a modernist, she wanted to be, Ellis said. “She loved folk music and wanted to document it, but at the same time, she wanted to be considered a ‘modern’ composer.”

A prominent member of the “ultramoderns,” whose music had a strong influence on composers like Elliott Carter, Seeger was born in East Liverpool, Ohio, and spent some of her childhood in Akron. In 1980, she was inducted into the Ohio Women’s Hall of Fame.

“This is just one example of how this program looks beyond the titles on the page and digs into what lies below the surface,” Ellis said.

“Without question, Carter was one of the most important composers of the modern period. When he wrote his *Quintet for Winds* in 1948, he was still a young man, and, as we know, he would live to be 104 and write incredibly diverse music,” Ellis said. “But was this piece considered modern at the time? It has so many interesting influences. He wrote it in tribute to Nadia Boulanger, and brought in early jazz music, to which there is a small reference to in the second movement. It should be considered modern, but it also includes other styles.”

Ellis said that Jeff Scott and Valerie Coleman often incorporate the music they grew up with into their compositions, noting that Jeff describes *Startin’ Sumthin’* as ‘a jazz shuffle scherzo.’ “It has many influences, yet it is a modern virtuosic piece for wind quintet,” Ellis said. “And Valerie’s *Rubispheres No. 1* for flute, clarinet, and bassoon, are super funky, groovy, relentless pieces that just charge at you. I think they fit really well into the program.”

Imani met Cuban-born saxophonist, clarinetist, and composer Paquito D’Rivera very early in the ensemble’s history. “Our former clarinetist, Mariam Adam, knew him and introduced us to his music nearly 20 years ago. He was attracted to what we were trying to do with the crossover feel that we have, and that led to us commissioning him to write *Kites*.” Originally composed for D’Rivera and the ensemble, the piece will be performed on Wednesday in Coleman’s arrangement for quintet alone. “He loves that Valerie did that, because Paquito often reinvents his own pieces,” Ellis said.

Another work that grew out of a collaboration is Palestinian-American oud

virtuoso Simon Shaheen's *Dance Mediterranea*. "About five years ago, we were planning to tour with Simon and needed a cool way to end our programs," Ellis said, "so we commissioned him to write a piece for us. We're ending this program with Jeff's arrangement for quintet alone."

Ellis said that she is thankful to be living in a time when classical music presenters and audiences are excited about Imani's approach to programming. "There's nothing wrong with a Beethoven string quartet cycle. We still want and need that in order to counterbalance groups like ours, but it's wonderful that there is room on the classical music stage for this type of concert."

Imani has performed in Northeast Ohio on many occasions, but Wednesday's concert marks their performance here with a new clarinetist. Replacing an established member of a group is always a test for any chamber ensemble, but Ellis said that she and her colleagues are fortunate to have found Mark Dover, who joined the group a year ago.

"I personally feel that blessings come upon people, and we were blessed to be together with Mariam for so many years. But we found what we were looking for in Mark. One of the things that really struck us is his ability to move between styles and genres. He fit in immediately, and he is one of the nicest people you would ever want to meet."

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