

Oberlin Historical Performance WinterFest: Flanders Recorder Quartet (February 20)

by Nicholas Stevens



Is there any feat of performance greater than transfixing and moving an audience while remaining warm, welcoming, humble, and human? In a concert last week in Oberlin College and Conservatory's Fairchild Chapel, the Flanders Recorder Quartet — performing in Northeast Ohio for the final time, as part of their 30th anniversary and farewell tour — offered a perfect blend of

profundity, virtuosity, and tasteful tomfoolery as a parting gift to area audiences.

In this guest recital on February 20, the quartet also mixed old and new music, reflecting both the long history of their instrument and the group's decades-long commitment to commissioning original repertoire. An opening performance of Michael Praetorius's "Summa Parenti Gloria" from the *Hymnodia Sionia* of 1611 led directly into the brief *Meditation* and *Fire* by Pieter Campo, both from 2015. This established the chronological range of the concert before a single member of the ensemble spoke — and speak each member did, establishing context between groups of pieces with charisma. Despite being a piece of "intelligent counterpoint," as high recorder specialist Tom Beets characterized it, "Summa Parenti Gloria" danced along with vital energy thanks to the group's crystal-clear articulations.

The Renaissance-style instruments on which the Quartet played these first pieces have a tighter, darker tone than the airier Baroque-style recorders that inform modern iterations, familiar to many from the musical misadventures of childhood. This dimmer, woodier

sound gave the undulating lines of *Meditation* the character of leaves rustling in a breeze, and allowed the bass recorder to take on a drum-like quality in *Fire*.

For a series of actual dances, the 15th suite from Johann Hermann Schein's 1617 *Banchetto Musicale* lacked the rhythmic allure of the Praetorius, and not by any fault of the ever-in-motion players. Switching to Baroque instruments, the Quartet next turned to Joseph Bodin de Boismortier's *Concerto VI*, Op. 15. Originally and unusually conceived for five flutes with no keyboard or bassline, this 1727 suite married French idioms to Italian concerto form, a synthesis that Boismortier made his life's work. In an eardrum-tickling Adagio, a lively Allegro, and a breezy second Allegro, the Quartet demonstrated the ability of this familiar-sounding instrument to create beautiful, cohesive statements.

Inxaxheba, a 2016 suite by Sören Sieg, found the Quartet turning to their lower-pitched set of instruments: a tenor, a basset, a bass, and a contrabass. With titles in Xhosa and rhythms inspired by South African traditional music, the piece serves as a joyful memorial and tribute to Sieg's late father. "Yitsho, yintoni ulonwabo" benefitted from percussive sounds and looping rhythms, "Ingxunguphalo" offered a meditative moment laced with soft harmonic clashes, and "Phaphazela" seemed to constantly reach upwards.

J.S. Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in C* evoked the organ, itself an instrument full of flutelike wooden pipes, and Astor Piazzolla's *Oblivion* gave the Quartet a chance to prove an unlikely proposition: that a group of four recorders can, under the right conditions, sound authentically sultry, even sexy.

A swinging rendition of Louis Prima's *Sing, Sing, Sing*, punctuated with a humorously whispered "yeah," concluded the program — but didn't end the concert. The group played two encores: an unidentified yet persuasive contemporary piece with a propulsive bassline, and the Overture from Bizet's *Carmen*. Unleashing both their world-class skills and their senses of humor, the Flanders delivered the latter with gleeful irreverence. Pauses, disunions, breakdowns of collective tempo, and even divergences of key elicited laughs, but also betrayed the brilliance of these four seriously unserious virtuosi. With a hoarse squeak from the soprano recorder, the concert — and the Quartet's periodic visits to Oberlin — came to a hilarious end.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 27, 2018.

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