

Music in the Circle Series debuts at Mixon & Gartner (July 11 & 14)

by David Kulma



Classical music concerts in Cleveland usually thin out in July as festivals outside the city get under way, most notably The Cleveland Orchestra's Blossom season. So it is a welcome turn of events to see a new international summer festival supported by University Circle institutions arrive for two weeks in mid-July. I attended the first weekend

of Music in the Circle concerts that brought musicians from around the world to the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall on Friday, July 11 and to the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on Sunday, July 14.

Each concert featured major repertoire in addition to a shorter piece of new music. The CMA concert included some engaging visuals, but the real draw was the extraordinary music making. It's hard to overstate how good the playing was.

July 11 at CIM

The Thursday evening Mixon concert opened with a work by Chris Neiner, Music in the Circle's associate director and composer-in-residence. Currently a graduate student at CIM, Neiner composed *Infinite Spinning* (2018) for Pierrot sextet. Living in the post-John Adams universe and incorporating the zazzy colors of the current new music dialect, Neiner's spiralling, perpetual motion piece offers pleasant shocks and melting cadences. Flutist Peter Afsten, clarinetist Mason Sangster, violinist Avigail Bushakevitz,

cellist Isable Gehweiler, percussionist Charles Renneker, and pianist Nicholas Underhill gave it an impressive account.

Violinist Minju Kim, Gehweiler, and pianist Kathryn Brown then joined in a magical performance of Felix Mendelssohn's *Piano Trio No. 1 in d*, spinning gold throughout the work's four movements. The first was perfectly performed, and the second's *Lieder ohne Worte* quality was simplicity itself, while the sparkling nuances and unflappable precision of the scherzo and finale left me speechless. It's performances like this one that make me love classical music.



After intermission, Bushakevitz, violist Matthew Cohen, cellist Khari Joyner, and music director and pianist Or Re'em gave a splendid reading of Brahms' *Piano Quartet No. 2 in A*. This intense yet open-hearted work in four movements spread like butter across the rest of the evening. The care these musicians took with their soft dynamics was spectacular — especially in the *Poco adagio* — and they applied their imposing virtuosity to the scherzo and finale.

July 14 at CMA

The Sunday afternoon concert at Gartner began with another grand chamber music statement — Dvořák's *Piano Quintet in A*. Filling out a towering 40 minutes, Bushakevitz, Kim, Cohen, Joyner, and pianist Yaron Kohlberg played this expansive narrative work with passion. The first movement was powerful and dramatic, while the elegiac “Dumka” was beautifully songful, especially the ecstatic and bubbling second section. The “Scherzo (Furiant)” was a virtuosic feast, and the boisterous finale with its gorgeous, translucent coda was fantastic.

Following intermission, Neiner conducted a sextet of musicians in Andrew Norman's *Music in Circles* (2012). Performing in conjunction with the fantastic music video that cinematographer John McCabe created to accompany the piece on yMusic's album, flutist Ashley Pattern Morgan, clarinetist Nicole Martin, bass clarinetist Sangster, Bushakevitz, Cohen, and Gehweiler played the cool, buzzy, slidey work with gusto. Norman has a great ear for color and takes music to surprising places, here ending with a question mark in the viola. The video, featuring nude dancer Sarah Singer, added to the impressive spectacle — in exciting choreography by Matthew Neff, she spins in slow motion, throws chalk dust, and suddenly turns into green pixels.



Camille Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* is a perennial favorite. Overdubbing text by Ogden Nash and Roger Moore spoken by Re'em and Bushakevitz brought it up a notch, but adding beautiful HD images of the animals on a gigantic screen above the stage really made this performance memorable. Re'em and Brown played the piano parts exquisitely, and the orchestra was in chamber music mode with one person per part. Flutist Mackenzi Danner fluttered fantastically in the "Aviary." Martin's clarinet playing was delightfully bird-brained in "The Cuckoo in the Woods," Renneker's xylophone appropriately boney in "Fossils," and Henry Samuels's double bass splendidly gruff in "The Elephant." Gehweiler and his cello easily stole the show with "The Swan." Rounding out the ensemble was violinist Ariel Clayton Karas, Bushakevitz, and Cohen.

Most of the movements worked quite well without a conductor, but a few moments here and there could have used help with precision. Otherwise, this performance was a reminder of how purposefully silly music can win the day.

One strange thing that can easily be corrected in future years, is that the only time anyone spoke from the stage was following the final piece at Mixon, catching some members of the audience already at the exits. Nevertheless, the first-rate music-making on display with Music in the Circle already makes me itch for a second festival next year.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 17, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)