

Aaron Diehl works his magic in Tri-C Classical Piano Series (Feb. 21)

by Mike Telin



Aaron Diehl is a magnificent pianist. He possesses an innate sense of rhythm and musical line. Everything he plays has purpose. Every note he plays sparkles.

On February 21, the Tri-C Classical Piano Series showcased the Columbus, Ohio native during a virtual concert celebrating Black History Month. The performance was pre-recorded in the auditorium at Tri-C Metro Campus.

Alone with his piano on a stage lit with a slight purple hue, Diehl began his 45-minute program with a journey into “stride.” He brought clear articulations, well-balanced bass lines, and seamless shifts in tempo to Fats Waller’s *Viper’s Drag*. Staying in the stride idiom, the pianist proved himself to be an astute improviser, turning Willie “The Lion” Smith’s *Fading Star* into a “classical” masterpiece.

Diehl’s classical sensibilities also served him well during Modern Jazz Quartet director John Lewis’s *Milano*. His clear, unblemished scale passages, coupled with knowing when to take time with a line and when to move it forward, honored the composer’s love of Chopin.

Next came selections from jazz pianist, arranger, and composer Mary Lou Williams’ classical-influenced *Zodiac Suite*. Although the movements are said to have been dedicated to Williams’ musical colleagues, including Billie Holiday and Art Tatum, they also reflect the characteristics of the astrological signs. Diehl’s “Cancer” was full of

emotion, his “Libra” perfectly balanced octaves and melodic material, and his “Scorpio” slowly plotted its way across the keys before going in for the sting.

Appropriate to the occasion, the program concluded with music by the “Dean of African American Classical Composers,” William Grant Still.



Seven Traceries is a mystical work that melds the composer’s affection for impressionism with the avant-garde. Diehl’s performance, from beginning to end, was superb. He brought sensitive phrasing and a smooth, burnished sound to “Cloud Cradles,” while “Mystic Pool” was defined by subtle dynamic contrasts. The fast, dancing passages during the brief “Muted Laughter” glowed, and his “Out of Silence” was appropriately romantic, while “Woven Silver” conjured up visions of fairies in the forest. The pianist found an attractive simplicity in “Wailing Dawn,” and flawlessly negotiated the dancing scale passages during the concluding “A Bit of Wit.”

In the end, Aaron Diehl delivered the perfect set. What a pleasure it was to not have the mesmerizing performance interrupted by spoken commentary — he let his artistry speak for itself.

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