

Michael Cleveland and Flamekeeper bring joyful enthusiasm to the ENCORE stage

by Stephanie Manning



In a typical year, the ENCORE Chamber Music Festival is not somewhere audiences would expect to hear bluegrass playing. And yet, on July 4, Michael Cleveland and his band Flamekeeper took the stage at the Dodero Performing Arts Center in Gates Mills for a wildly fun concert that truly encapsulated the spirit of chamber music.

Before Flamekeeper appeared, an ensemble of thirteen ENCORE artists opened the program with Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. Without a conductor, the group sounded somewhat hesitant during the softer sections, but the richer and more energetic passages helped settle them into a pleasant groove. Though the venue's acoustic lacked resonance, it created an up-close listening experience.

From the first note of Flamekeeper's electrifying performance, it quickly became clear that rather than typical silence of a classical audience, these musicians thrive with an audience who make noise. It turned out that the infectious enthusiasm of all five players was all the persuasion the listeners needed, and soon they were clapping and cheering after each exhilarating solo.

Michael Cleveland draws out such breathtaking virtuosity from his fiddle that it's hard to look away. Though he was the center of the show, his four bandmates also displayed impressive musicianship: Chris Douglas on bass, Nathan Livers on mandolin, Josh Richards on guitar, and Jasiah Shrode on banjo. The amp setup was balanced nicely, allowing the players to fill the hall with sound while still letting listeners hear the fine soloistic details.

It felt like the band barely paused for breath during the first four songs, which they performed without a break. Among these high-energy tunes was their cover of Julian Lennon's "Too Late For Goodbyes," the lead track from the band's 2014 album *On*

Down the Line. Though Flamekeeper play plenty of bluegrass staples, this is far from the only song in their repertoire to originate outside the bluegrass realm, and the group have characteristically made it their own.

Flamekeeper's latest release, *Tall Fiddler*, won the Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album early last year — an award which, as Cleveland likes to say, promptly “shut the whole world down.” The second half of the set featured three of the album's toe-tapping numbers: “Tennessee Plates,” “Mountain Heartache,” and the title track. The latter features a particularly challenging guitar part, originally recorded by Tommy Emmanuel but here performed impressively by Richards.

The group then teased their upcoming material with “The Blues Are Close To Hand,” a number which — as is typical for bluegrass — features an up-tempo beat that belies the downtrodden and sometimes dark nature of the lyrics.

Another recent addition to their repertoire is “One Horse Town,” originally by Southern rock band Blackberry Smoke. The standout of the evening, this was Richards' best vocal performance. The sensitive playing from all the musicians beautifully embodied the lyrics, which describe someone longing to leave their small town while also feeling pressured to stay behind.

The set concluded with a song that has a special place in Cleveland's heart — “Orange Blossom Special,” the piece that introduced him to the fiddle at four years old. Also called the “Fiddler's National Anthem,” it made for a mesmerizing, fiery finale that showcased Cleveland in his element.

Throughout the concert, the five musicians shared a genuine camaraderie that infused every note with their love for music-making. Their teamwork is proof that chamber music transcends the boundaries of genre — it's about the true joy of collaboration.

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