

Imani Winds embrace modernity in season opener for the Cleveland Chamber Music Society

by Stephanie Manning



This season, even more than usual, Imani Winds is booked and busy. Rescheduled concerts from last year, combined with new additions to their schedule, promise a season full of travel and performances. “It’s a lot of making up for lost time,” bassoonist Monica Ellis said in a recent interview. “We’re just grateful that we’re able to be back and have live performances again, in one way or another.”

One performance relocated from 2020 is the Imani’s visit to the Cleveland Chamber Music Society on Tuesday, October 5 in CIM’s Mixon Hall. The 7:30 pm performance will be preceded by a 6:30 lecture by Chris Jenkins. Click [here](#) for tickets.

The program is a collection of five varied pieces that the group considers modern — if not in time period, then in style. The first half features mid-20th century French influences. The “lively, fun little opener,” Eugene Bozza’s *Scherzo*, leads into Elliott Carter’s *Quintet for Winds* — a piece that is French in spirit though written by an American. Dedicated to Carter’s teacher Nadia Boulanger, the piece offers characteristically French melodies while also leaving room for Carter to experiment with chromaticism.

Following the Carter is Henri Tomasi’s *Cinq danses profanes et sacrées*. The contrast of the gloomy, “profane” dances with the brighter, “sacred” ones creates lots of variety in the five-movement work, which features each instrument in a soloistic way. Ellis noted that Tomasi is known for his “gnarly writing,” especially for winds. “It’s always a challenge, and there’s no exception here.”

Another technical challenge is Anders Hillborg's *Six Pieces for Wind Quintet*, which Ellis described as "just madness." Dramatic shifts in energy characterize this "wild ride" of a piece, which is relatively new to the group. "There's one movement that has this maddening bassoon cadenza that is just all over the horn," Ellis said, adding that clarinetist Mark Dover has frequently compared it to "a Jimi Hendrix solo."

The program will end with what has become an Imani Winds classic — Valerie Coleman's *Afro-Cuban Concerto*, which Ellis described as one of the composer's first "masterpieces." Coleman, one of the group's founding members and their flutist until 2018, wrote the piece for the Imani in 2001. The three-movement work was intended to be a concerto with orchestra, but when those plans didn't pan out, Coleman rearranged it for the quintet alone.

The Imani are able to pack multiple shorter pieces into one concert, which Ellis said "is a plus." Since wind quintets don't have a lot of entrenched programming choices, "we can create the tradition, and we can do our own thing." And, she added, "if you don't like something you're hearing, don't worry about it — in about seven or eight more minutes, it'll be done."

The biggest change since the Imani's last performance in Northeast Ohio is their newest member, horn player Kevin Newton, who formally joined the group in June. The 28-year-old, fresh out of grad school and currently pursuing his doctorate, "brings a whole different perspective and vibe to the energy of the group," Ellis said. "It's been an exciting adjustment period — it's been one that has allowed us to find new ways to play the same music, to explore brand new repertoire that we didn't do before, and things like that."

Former horn player Jeff Scott now teaches at Oberlin Conservatory, an alma mater for three of the group's five musicians: Ellis, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, and flutist Brandon Patrick George. The Imani will pay a visit to the school on October 4 for a Q&A session with students. "All of us are proud graduates," Ellis said. "So we're excited to come back to the area and just be around people that we know and love."

Imani Winds was founded in 1997 — two years after Ellis left Oberlin — making 2021-22 the group's 25th season. It's a milestone which the bassoonist said "feels amazing."

"It's pretty remarkable, I have to say, and I'm very proud of the work we've done — proud of the strides we've made that have people out there looking up to us and thinking about us as trailblazers. It's fun to reflect on it, but also, we're all about the work. We're

about keeping going and seeing what new, innovative things we can continue to work towards.”

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