

## Cyrus Chestnut offers a night of holiday comfort food for the soul. (Dec. 8)

by Kevin McLaughlin

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Cyrus Chestnut is good company for the holidays. On Friday, December 8 he seemed genuinely delighted, even a little surprised, to have so many people in attendance in Mandel Hall at Severance Music Center to hear him play.

“Wow,” he said, walking onstage with his trio, “So many people!” And, though he didn’t actually say it, he probably thought, “Well, as long as you’re here, do you know the Charlie

Brown Christmas soundtrack? It goes like this...”

Chestnut is an endearing presence onstage. His shyness and slightly awkward patter are kept out of the squeamish zone by the grand virtuosity of his piano playing. The minute after telling the story about his fame in high school for his ability to play the Charlie Brown song (Linus and Lucy) and then forgetting the next song on his setlist, he promptly whirled around to summon magnificence from the keyboard.

Though the evening was mostly comfort food — a jazz trio retelling of Vince Guaraldi’s A Charlie Brown Christmas album from 1965 — it was done with sophistication and wisdom. There were occasional gospel references, too (Chestnut learned to play in church), and even classical.

By the end of the night, you got the feeling he could play in almost any style. Bach and Beethoven crept into an extended improvisation where Baby Dance transformed into Für Elise, motivating Chestnut’s fingers to vault up and down the keyboard.

He was ably joined by sidemen Herman Burney Jr., on bass, Kelton Norris on drums, and the 21-year-old chanteuse, Haley Driver. Driver’s stylish interpretations of “Christmas

Time is Here,” “Winter Wonderland,” “The Christmas Song” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” were breaths of fresh air. The sexiness of “Santa Baby” was a little cringe-worthy coming from the mouth of someone so young, but we managed to avert our eyes, enjoy her vocal skill and the trio’s performance and think mostly pure thoughts.

A lovely carol medley, including a poignant “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” came close to the end of the second half and may have been Chestnut’s most heartfelt performance of the night.

Chestnut’s stated goal, both before and afterward, was to have his audience “feel better by the end of the night than at the start.” The degree of his success was made clear by the number of smiles and the extended applause — enough for one encore: a deeply affecting “O Holy Night” for solo piano.

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