

Imani Winds bring music for thought to Oberlin (Mar. 7)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Imani Winds completed a brief residency at Oberlin Conservatory in spectacular and moving fashion with a recital of new and involving works in Warner Concert Hall on March 7.

A pre-concert panel — which brought together Oberlin faculty members with the Imani Winds' Monica Ellis and Chamber Music Detroit's Bryan Jones — helped frame the music to come. Jeff Scott's *Fallen Petals of Nameless Flowers*, an unflinching look at the U.S. criminal justice system historically misapplied to young men of color, served as the emotional and consequential center of the program, and the through-line of the discussion.

Jody Kerchner shared her activity as Director of the Oberlin Music at Grafton Choir, playing excerpts of music written and performed by its incarcerated members while they listened in real time on a livestream.

Other works were compelling if less substantive, though the depth of the performances compensated for that. Tight cohesion, unanimity of rhythm, and dazzling displays of virtuosity are the stock-in-trade of these players — flutist Brandon Patrick George, oboist Mekhi Gladden, clarinetist Mark Dover, hornist Kevin Newton, and bassoonist Monical Ellis — and the performances of Damien Geter's *I Said What I Said* and Carlos Simon's *Giants* showed these qualities, as well as the group's sure sense of purpose.

I Said What I Said makes mimetic use of repetition to refer to the Black experience and the constant need to defend oneself in a white world, while *Giants* — a set of character studies of Bessie Smith, Cornel West, and Herbie Hancock — showed the Imani's comfort level in jazz and vernacular idioms.

Andy Akiho's *BeLoud, BeLoved, BeLonging* also took on the inhumanity of mass incarceration. Inspired by the sound of protests by immigrant detainees at New York's Metropolitan Detention Center in 2019, the piece came together in workshop sessions with a group of young incarcerated men at Rikers Island.

Akiho, a steel pan virtuoso, has a fondness for unremitting Steve Reich-like melodic patterns — even if the writing is more idiomatic for percussionists than for wind players. Out-of-phase patterns of increasing density and complexity demanded maximum concentration and endurance. After twenty minutes, helter-skelter activity ceased — undoubtedly by design, but to the sympathetic listener, it seemed more like an act of surrender. There were two breaks in the action where a steel pan might have soloed (and did in the premiere), but in its absence, these were treated as breaks between movements and, no doubt, opportunities to rest the chops.

Billy Taylor's *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*, made famous by Nina Simone, was the ecstatic climax before intermission that clarinetist and arranger Mark Dover must have hoped it would be. His own extended improvisation reached Benny Goodman-esque heights, and when Kevin Newton put his horn down to sing a couple of joyful gospel choruses, the newly-converted jumped to their collective feet.

Cellist Seth Parker Woods, pianist Cory Smythe, and narrator Michael Braugher joined the Imani onstage after intermission for a moving performance of Jeff Scott's *Fallen Petals of Nameless Flowers*.

Scott's motivating force — the application of mandatory life sentences without possibility of parole, which fall disproportionately on young men of color — was made all the more powerful by Robert Laidler's text, which was evidently written in tandem with the music. Metaphors of flowers as men and petals as arms are revealed in the personal stories.

Braugher was compelling in his calm and matter-of-fact delivery. The first story, an over-in-an-instant account of a young Black kid firing a shotgun in self-defense, was sadly identifiable and real. Society's retaliation was similarly swift — a hasty trial with unconcerned defense and a reflexive, long-term sentence. "It all happened within 30 seconds. A person died; the world rotated."

Scott's music uncannily fit the subject — jazzy, breezy, a nonchalant surface concealing a deeper undertow. The concluding American chorale was heart-breaking.

Photo by Scott Shaw

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