

Imani Winds captivate in Kent Blossom debut (July 3)

by Stephanie Manning



Given Imani Winds' active touring schedule, it's not unusual to see the group revisit the same part of the U.S. within a few months. So while it might feel like the wind quintet was just here for their March performance in Oberlin, July 3 saw them return to Northeast Ohio to appear on the Kent Blossom Music Festival's Faculty Concert Series in Ludwig Recital Hall. Thankfully, this proximity was no issue — Imani is a group worth hearing again and

again.

The evening's program, "Black and Brown II: A Celebration of Composers of Color," was understandably similar to the one from March, although not without some notable changes. Now back from leave, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz brought her beautifully warm tone to melodies like those in Paquito D'Rivera's *Aires Tropicales* (one of two new musical additions). Imani chose three movements from the piece, including "Afro" — a flute-led call and response — which is a nod to the influence of the transatlantic slave trade on Cuban music.

The shortest and last movement, "Contradanza," bubbled with energy, embodying what Imani does best. So too did the toe-tapping technical dexterity of the opener, Damien Geter's *I Said What I Said*.

Great eye contact and clear cues, another area in which Imani excels, served them well in pieces like Carlos Simon's *Giants*, which is dedicated to important figures in African American history. Hornist Kevin Newton wielded truly impressive control over his instrument, popping in and out of the texture with the growls in the first movement, "Bessie Smith." The chromaticism of the second, "Cornel West," laid the foundation for Newton's striking sforzandos, interjecting and immediately backing off into quiet held notes.

Flutist Brandon Patrick George introduced the second new addition to the program and the most recent work, Shawn Okpebholo's *Rise*, by describing it as a musical metaphor for unity. The idea of sowing seeds and watching them grow begins with the first movement "Spark," but the second movement "Harmony" was more intriguing, showcasing the group's ability to balance each chord just right.

The players seemed more focused on their counting and entrances than usual, likely because this piece is so new (it premiered in January). But surely more ease and familiarity will come with time.

A piece Imani likely knows by heart at the moment is Andy Akiho's *BeLoud, BeLoved, BeLonging*, which they recently released on CD in collaboration with the composer. The group chose to perform the last two movements, "BeLoved" and "BeLonging," which nicely complement each other — the first layering melodies on top of the bassoon and horn rhythms, and the second layering rhythms over melodies from the flute and oboe. Bassoonist Monica Ellis asserted herself by making even repetitive moments shine with character, a task she repeated throughout the evening.

After the breathless ending to the Akiho, clarinetist Mark Dover's arrangement of Dr. Billy Taylor's *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* provided a soothing balm to the soul. "We take it to church on this one," Dover said beforehand, and all five certainly did, thanks to Dover's sweeping clarinet in particular.

Spellman-Diaz and Newton also got to flex their singing skills, adding the lyrics in a section that was chills-inducing in the best way. The arrangement has been a staple in Imani's repertoire this season, and for good reason. After all, the lyrics may as well be a mission statement for the activist-minded group:

*I wish I could say all the things that I should say
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear*

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