

Kent Blossom closes out Faculty Concert Series with two classics (July 17)

by Stephanie Manning



With a program of only two pieces, both of them staples in chamber music repertoire, creating the conditions for a standout performance might be more difficult than usual. But the musicians in Kent Blossom Music Festival’s final entry in this year’s Faculty Concert Series knew what to do.

“Friendship is a requirement to open up and enjoy this piece,” clarinetist Afendi Yusuf said of the opener, Mozart’s *Clarinet Quintet* —

though this sentiment could equally apply to Schubert’s *Octet* that followed. The July 17 performance in Kent State University’s Ludwig Recital Hall proved that the group had the friendship element in spades.

Seven of the eight players were linked through their positions in The Cleveland Orchestra, with the exception being visiting artist and violinist William Hagen (*pictured*). But Hagen had plenty of connections of his own, having helped put together what he called a “dream program” with Yusuf and violinist Stephen Tavani.

In the Schubert, Hagen took to the first violin part with gusto, obviously relishing all six movements. His playing was especially sensitive to his unison moments with Yusuf and violist William Bender, and included a lovely delicate solo in the second-movement Adagio. Although he briefly teetered on the edge of over-excitement during the third movement, the Allegro vivace’s boisterous nature felt refreshing amid an evening of mostly moderate tempos.

Cellist Tanya Ell and bassist Charles Paul kept things running smoothly in the background, and really dug in to underscore the dramatic exclamations of the finale. Ell made the most of any solo opportunity throughout, asserting herself occasionally to make sure none of those lines passed unnoticed. Yusuf, bassoonist Barrick Stees, and hornist Richard King crafted a great blend together, like the sectionmates they are.

Of the winds, Yusuf most often took the leading role, tossing off tricky passages without so much as a blink. He did the same in the Mozart *Clarinet Quintet*, his buttery-smooth sound easily becoming one with the string players surrounding him. His playing felt like one boundless musical line, naturally ebbing and flowing, but never interrupted unexpectedly by register changes or the like. The Mozart group felt the steadiest when he was at the helm — and his earlier comment about friendship revealed itself through the eye contact and energy that radiated in between everyone.

Stephen Tavani, playing first violinist for this work, generally appeared less animated than Hagen on his left — the two resembled a kind of yin and yang in that way. But Tavani's brief re-tuning before the fourth movement seemed to revive him with new confidence. After the gentleness and careful phrases of the first three movements, the density of notes picks up in the finale, and Tavani helped ensure the group's playing was nice and bouncy.

Of the four programs on Kent Blossom's Faculty Concert Series, this one appeared at first glance to be the most straightforward. True, there weren't many twists and turns — but the nature of the pieces (especially the hour-long Schubert) allowed time for contemplating the joy of just sitting back and watching people make the music that they love.

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