

CIM New Music Ensemble plays Ives & Stewart (Sept. 30)

by Peyton Avery



On Sunday, September 30, the Cleveland Institute of Music's New Music Ensemble presented a concert in Mixon Hall featuring music by Charles Ives, in celebration of his 150th birthday, as well as works by Kulas visiting artist Curtis Stewart.

The program opened with Ives' three movement *String Quartet No. 2* performed by violinists Maude Cloutier and Amelia Korbitz, violist Ben Carter, and cellist Liam Battle. This piece, which took Ives six years to complete, portrays four men — represented by the ensemble members — who converse, argue, and eventually ascend a mountain together.

In the first movement, "Conversations & Discussions," the musicians skillfully blended their individual voices, creating an array of beautiful phrases and tonal shifts.

In movement two, "Arguments," Ives intentionally disrupts the cohesion of the quartet, giving each player the opportunity to show their technical and musical prowess. The composer's comedic flair came through as second violinist Korbitz played romantic cadenzas, and tap-conducted the tempo to pull the chaos of the music back together.

"The Call of the Mountains," opens with gentle dissonances, allowing the ensemble to redirect the concert's trajectory. Their technical mastery, rich tone, and fluid character transitions were impressive, although the pedal stomping to turn digital pages was distracting.

After a brief intermission, the program continued with Curtis Stewart's *The Gilded Cage*, a piano quintet inspired by Stewart's father and drawing on themes, songs, and stories from the Baptist Churches and the denizens of Newport, Rhode Island. Violinists

Minchae Kim and Yuwa Roten, violist Chris Gokelman, cellist Fiona Tsang, and pianist Jack Naglick conveyed a deep understanding and passion for Stewart's music. The piece invited listeners on a sonic journey while the musicians skillfully navigated its ever changing colors, creating a nostalgic, and pensive atmosphere. While the piano occasionally overpowered the other instruments the overall performance left a lasting impression of tranquility.

Curtis's *Do You See the Flag?* for vocalist, piano, and electronics, was inspired by the U.S. National Anthem and the poem that influenced its creation. The piece explores themes of chaos and purpose, inviting listeners to reflect on who we fight for amid our individual and shared turmoil. Jack Naglick handled both piano and electronics, while baritone Davis Fischer began the performance with his back to the audience, turning around as he sang *Do You See the Flag?*

Throughout, Fischer alternated between singing and *sprechstimme* — a vocal technique that requires the performer to talk the written pitches — adding a haunting effect. Despite moments when the piano drowned out other elements, Fischer's strong yet nuanced voice held the audience's attention, resulting in a powerful and memorable performance.

The concert concluded with Stewart performing three selections from his *24 Caprices for Solo Violin: Lift Every Voice and Sing* (the Black National Anthem), *Thalassaki Mou* (a Greek folk song), and *Isn't She Lovely* (Stewart's inventive take on Stevie Wonder's original). Between pieces, Stewart expressed his gratitude for being in Cleveland and shared touching stories about his mother's influence on his compositions.

His short solo performance demonstrated his virtuosity, warmth, and storytelling ability, leaving the listener eager to hear more of his work. The final caprice ended with a delicate *pizzicato diminuendo poco a poco*, wrapping the concert up — and leaving rainy Cleveland with a calming layer of sentimentality.

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