

Quince Ensemble at CIM: patience pays off (Oct. 16)

by Stephanie Manning



The Quince Ensemble doesn't specialize in instant gratification. The vocal quartet likes "slow music," as soprano Amanda DeBoer Bartlett has explained in interviews, and she repeated that sentiment onstage on October 16. "Not slow in tempo, but slow in development."

That ethos can also form the arc of entire programs, as Quince demonstrated to its audience at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Before the concert in Mixon Hall reached its apex with Courtney Bryan's *Requiem*, the quartet built up to the finale by demonstrating just what their voices can do.

DeBoer Bartlett, her fellow sopranos Liz Pearse and Carrie Henneman Shaw, and mezzo-soprano Kayleigh Butcher are all fearless champions of contemporary music, with the pipes to back it up. The four women exhibit a natural teamwork and achieve a beautiful blend, so much so that their voices sometimes seemed to emerge from the hall itself.

Nowhere was this better displayed than in Laura Steenberge's *The Four Winds*, an existentialist work that requires its performers to wear many hats. The first movement highlighted the eerie precision of their dissonances, while the fourth required them to sing through harmonicas, impressively fading into one voice at the end.

The piece's text includes the composer's scratchy, minimalist drawings for the second and fourth movements, which help set the mood — but disappointingly, the physical program handed out to the CIM attendees did not contain these, or any texts at all.

The absence of lyrics also impacted Dave Reminick's "Aún" from *In Dreams*, which tells a specific story of someone's dream and includes portions in Spanish. But the musical content still intrigued. The vocalists slid up and down in pitch during Kayleigh Butcher's moving solo.

In Leah Blankendaal's largely wordless *Your space has echoes*, Liz Pearse cued entrances and conducted as the different parts slid neatly into place. Mixon Hall, with its

high ceiling, is perhaps not the best venue for a piece like this — the way Blankendaal plays with texture might have worked better in a more intimate setting.

Evan Williams' *Dust Bowl*, however, resonated perfectly. This is a piece that is both slow in development and slow in tempo, a brooding reflection on the devastating dust storms of the 1930s. "The land wants me to come back," the quartet repeated mournfully.

The Dust Bowl connection also carried over to Courtney Bryan's *Requiem* — the first seven minutes were originally a piece called *Dust to Dust*, before Bryan expanded it for another commission with Quince and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Originally intended to premiere in 2020, the work for voices, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, tuba, and percussion fell victim to pandemic cancellations. And those tumultuous times also gave *Requiem*'s topic — an exploration of different cultural death rituals — a layer of unintended meaning.

The opening *a capella* section found Quince becoming more forceful in their enunciation, as they twisted in and out of four-part harmony. And the spoken pleas of "Listen!" that announce the second section felt especially raw and emotional. The CIM instrumentalists, led by Jake Taniguchi, proved agile collaborators — tuba player Adam Lindsey held down the bass section, and clarinetist Jazmin Pascual Flores enchanted with her solos.

Bryan's melodic fragments have a habit of sticking with you long after the last note. "We will...we will all be changed," echoed in my mind as I walked to my car. Changed by the pandemic, changed by death, changed by dreams — this concert had asked a lot of introspection from its audience. I drove home in thoughtful silence.

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