

## Cleveland Chamber Music Society:

### Imani Winds go all out with Michelle Cann (Oct. 15)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Imani Winds has mastered the art of extemporized risk-taking. If most of the notes on Tuesday, October 15, were predetermined, the specialness was in what was not on the page. It's what one aspires to hear from the best chamber

music performances and in jazz: aligned individual and group invention, conversational interplay, courage of dynamics, tempos, and timbres edging on extremes — music-making never again to be heard in exactly the same way.

Flutist Brandon Patrick George, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, clarinetist Mark Dover, horn player Kevin Newton, and bassoonist Monica Ellis were joined by pianist Michelle Cann — a potent spark of invention in her own right — in a program of varied, but logically grouped works by Paquito D'Rivera, Lalo Shifrin, Francis Poulenc, and Valerie Coleman. Ellis described the evening's sequence as "concentric circles" coinciding in Paris, or at least in a French aesthetic.

Jazz clarinetist and composer Paquito D'Rivera's *A Little Cuban Jazz Waltz*, written for the Imani to mark its 25th anniversary, showed off the group's ability to read each other's minds. As an arranged note-by-note retelling of the composer's own recorded clarinet solo in his song "I Missed You Too!", Imani's rendering recalled or possibly outdid the popular jazz troupe "Super Sax" from the 1970s with their virtuosic conformity.

In Lalo Shifrin's *La Nouvelle Orleans*, funeral music from New Orleans made a guest appearance with a mournful to joyous design. Clarinetist Mark Dover played a riotous out-chorus that chased away all evil spirits, at least until Halloween.

Valerie Coleman's *Portraits of Langston* is an homage to poet Langston Hughes, and featured a slimmed down iteration of the ensemble: flute, clarinet, Cann at the piano. Putting her bassoon aside, Ellis as narrator was an eloquent and piercing communicator of Hughes' poems that are based on his experiences in Paris and Harlem. "Le Grand Duc Mambo," recounts a confrontation at a jazz club in the red-light district of Montmartre, in which Florence Mills appears — the beloved jazz singer who died at age thirty-one, of tuberculosis.

Monica Ellis's full-throated bassoon drew the ear all evening, but especially in the two Poulenc chamber works. It's a treat to hear a bassoonist with the dynamic range and robustness of tone to compete with the other players, and Ellis, aided by tasteful musicality and dead accurate intonation, triumphantly vindicated Poulenc's obvious affection for her instrument.

Toyin Spellman-Diaz's oboe playing also provided a sweetness, particularly in the delicious Poulenc *Trio* and the lovely second movement of the *Sextet*.

The highlight for me was the last work, the Poulenc *Sextet*, which was elevated if not utterly revealed by Michelle Cann at the piano. She is a wonderful chamber contributor, fitting inside textures or improving everything around her, but also — as Poulenc seems to have had in mind — serving as leader of the band. The ensemble was unanimous in conveying the music's manic shifts, from raucous to melancholic, and the majesty of the final coda, which brought the audience to their feet.

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