

## CityMusic Cleveland Chamber Orchestra at Fairmount Presbyterian (May 15)

by Kevin McLaughlin



In a 1902 interview, Gabriel Fauré, who spent much of his career as an organist, said his goal in writing his *Requiem* was to stray from the established path, “after all those years accompanying funerals.” So, rather than ending with the horror of a *Dies irae*, he chose *In Paradisum* instead.

On Thursday, May 15, at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, CityMusic Cleveland delivered both heaven and earth over the

course of a diverse program. Responding to conductor Lorenzo Lopez’s assured direction, the ensemble gave sympathetic readings of William Grant Still’s *Danzas de Panama* and Gabriela Lena Frank’s *Leyendas*, then ascended to a higher place in Fauré’s *Requiem*, aided by superb singing from soprano Chabrelle Williams, baritone Bryan Keith Johnson, and the CityMusic Community Choir.

The strings of CityMusic captured the Caribbean-infused spirit of William Grant Still’s *Danzas de Panama*. In the outer movements, players slapped the sides of their instruments for African-inspired effects before introducing Latin melodies. Violins made the most of the languid Mexican flavor in the Punto movement, relishing its mariachi-style thirds. In the finale, the ensemble embraced the exuberance of the two concluding dances, the Cumbia and the Congo.

Gabriela Lena Frank, who has been hearing-impaired since childhood, once described her composing process: “I don’t listen to music. I take off my hearing aids and stay in silence for a few days. In the absence of sound, my imagination goes to different places.

It's a bit like being in a dream." *Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout* was indeed a dreamscape of unexpected sounds.

Drawing on her Peruvian heritage, Frank presents six character pieces that explore Andean myth and tradition through extended string techniques and vivid color shifts. Though scored entirely for string orchestra (expanded from the string quartet original), the instruments frequently impersonate the timbres of native instruments — panpipes, *tarkas* (wooden flutes), and guitars. The musicians handled these demands deftly, particularly concertmaster Laura Hamilton and principal violist Jonathan Bagg, who took impressive solo turns. Largely eschewing dramatics, Lopez allowed the work's modern compositional language to peacefully coexist alongside its folk-rooted expression.

After intermission, the mood shifted with a performance of Fauré's *Requiem*. As sometimes happens in exceptional concerts, a mysterious, goosebump-inducing sense of accord took hold.

The *Requiem*'s instrumentation often varies in performances depending on chorus size and acoustics. CityMusic approximated Fauré's original version from 1888 — a small orchestra of solo violin, divided violas, divided cellos and basses, harp, and organ — although, to its detriment, it dispensed with timpani.

Organist Jonathan Moyer registered his instrument beautifully, and horns contributed perfectly weighted pearls of sound. The singers of CityMusic Cleveland choir were splendid: with pitch-perfect, warmly blended voices, they achieved a kind of serene benevolence. Soprano Chabrelle Williams brought an angelic, shimmering purity to the "Pie Jesu," and Baritone Brian Keith Johnson sang with exceptional authority and clarity in the "Offertorium" and "Libera me." Lopez controlled both pace and spell, gently guiding Fauré's — and our own — trajectory toward a deeply peaceful state.

By the final "In Paradisum," one felt not only moved but gently transported — a musical rite of passage from the everyday to the celestial.

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