

Oberlin Artist Recital Series
features bassist Linda May Han Oh (Mar. 19)

by Max Newman



Upon first thought, you would think that conveying complex themes like “the fragility of time and life” through mostly wordless music would seem futile. Bassist Linda May Han Oh and her band would beg to differ.

On March 19 in Oberlin’s Finney Chapel, the group achieved exactly that with their performance of *The Glass Hours*. It was an uncategorizable concert, heavy with feeling and chock-full of technical prowess.

Some concerts in Finney Chapel are swallowed up by the venue’s cavernous qualities. This was not one of them. Oh and her band sent notes swimming to every corner of the space, building walls of sound that were dotted by well-defined lead lines and solos — the ensemble was able to simultaneously convey cacophony and sonic exactitude with exquisite dynamic control.

But there was also space for individual brilliance, each member of the band was eminently talented. Oh played the bass with astonishing dexterity, flitting between different sounds and styles in the blink of an eye. Slow-jazz slid smoothly into celebratory samba stylings throughout the night. Her ability to sing veering,

idiosyncratic melodies in tandem with these plucked backdrops was also an impressive feat.

The rest of the band got in on the fun, too. Sara Serpa complemented the bandleader with bouncy, winding vocal lines full of equal parts whimsy and soulfulness. Her vocal tone was exquisite, possessing the versatility of a wind instrument. Fabian Alzaman on piano, played with a terrific nonchalance that belied the intricacy of his parts. He hurled barrages of angular stabs and unfurled lush blankets of sound with equivalent brilliance.

Greg Ward matched his bandmates with his versatility on alto sax. At times, his tone was indistinguishable from that of the group's two vocalists. At other times he veered away from the human range into earth-shattering solos, painting beautiful, rhythm-defying patterns upon Oh's arrangements. And Mark Whitfield, Jr.'s drumming was nothing short of spectacular. He played with a stellar steeliness while also engineering some of the night's most outstanding solos.

There was not a weak link in the night's setlist, but a couple of the works stood out. "Hatchling," dedicated to Oh's son, straddled the line between playful and heartfelt, with exquisite vocal runs shadowed by Oh's virtuosic basslines, which bounced above Whitfield's gentle cymbalwork. And Alzaman's dense chordal work was striking — turning every melodic corner, he made an unexpected diversion, a jump to a mysterious yet beautiful sonic palette sprinkled with dissonance. The overall mood was one that captured that ineffable, enchanting adoration so often felt for a loved one.

But the evening's most encompassing piece was the opener, a delightful, ever-changing work that began with the creation of a wall of sound, kickstarted by a flourish of bass and voice, and followed by gentle sax, atmospheric drums, and extended techniques from Alzaman — he leaned into the body of the piano to pluck its strings.

When the piece transitioned into a defined rhythm, it did so with reckless abandon, hurling plumes of tightrope-walking melodies into the Finney Chapel air. But its edge was mellowed by Serpa's soothing voice and Ward's purring saxophone, both of which gradually transformed the controlled chaos into samba-esque patterns. This laid the groundwork for a thrilling closing solo from Whitfield, Jr. — an octopus-armed, snare and tom-heavy avalanche, executed with jaw-dropping speed.

That was Linda May Han Oh and her group in a nutshell. Capable of the high, the low, the tranquil, and the explosive, all with an iron grip on the heartstrings of their audience. *The Glass Hours* was excellent from start to finish.

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