



The Alias Chamber Ensemble and composer Gabriela Lena Frank kicked off the season with the magnificent debut of "Hilos"

Golden Threads

by [John Pitcher](#)

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If you want to terrify a concert audience into fleeing a theater, you don't have to shout "fire." In many American cities you only have to whisper the words "modern music."

Fortunately, that's not the case in Nashville, where the Alias Chamber Ensemble has developed a large and loyal following for its adventurous programming. Alias packed the Blair School of Music's Turner Hall for its season-opening concert last Friday with a program that included the world premiere of Gabriela Lena Frank's "Hilos" for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, along with music by D.J. Sparr, Kenji Bunch and Bayani Mendoza de Leon.

Frank, a 38-year-old California-based pianist and composer, often writes music that draws on her multicultural heritage. Her mother is a Peruvian of Chinese descent, and her father is an American of Lithuanian-Jewish ancestry.

"Hilos" finds its inspiration in the composer's Peruvian background. The title means "threads" and alludes to the colorful beauty of Peru's textiles. Frank refers to the piece as a kind of Peruvian "Pictures at an Exhibition."

Lasting about 30 minutes, "Hilos" is an expansive work consisting of eight short movements, which boast such descriptive titles as "Charanguista Viejo" (Old Charango Player) and "Zumballyu" (Spinning Top). The score is positively brimming with rhythmically vital and lyrically appealing ideas. But its greatness stems from its prismatic beauty.

Frank left no timbre unexplored. She mixed and matched the work's instrumental combinations, with some movements highlighting the sounds of just two instruments — "Charanguista Viejo," for instance, was primarily a dialogue between violin and piano. The result was a work full of diaphanous textures.

Frank also created vivid sonic images with her imaginative scoring. She used piano tremolos and broken chords in "Charanguista Viejo" to evoke the sound of a charango, a traditional Peruvian ukelele-like instrument. Likewise, a hint of violin scratch tones in the same movement suggested the sound of an old man singing.

Frank certainly couldn't have hoped for a better performance. An accomplished pianist, she joined Alias musicians Zeneba Bowers, violin, Lee Levine, clarinet, and Matt Walker, cello, in a rendition that was both spontaneous and intensely musical. Frank tossed off the work's bold tremolos and glissandi with dramatic flair, making the music sparkle. But she was also a sensitive accompanist whose flexible phrasing always brought out the best in the other players.

Bowers, Alias' artistic director, proved to be a serious and stylish artist. Her golden tone made Frank's highly emotional melodies seemingly melt, and her perfect intonation allowed her to hit every note dead center — no

mean feat given that many of "Hilos' " special effects (quick slides and pizzicatos) turned notes into moving targets.

Levine delivered some of the evening's most memorable performances. Her playful melodies in the opening movement, "Canto del Altiplano" (Song of the Highlands), readily called to mind the sound of traditional panpipes and flutes. She added colorful counterpoint in the next movement, "Zapatos de Chincha" (Shoes of Chincha).

Walker, Alias' executive director, also gave an impressive performance. He played with an amber tone and a solid technique — his playing of fast passages in the fourth movement "Danza de los Diablos" (Devil Dance) had real fire. But he was also a team player whose careful listening resulted in a beautifully synchronized performance.

Alias has recorded "Hilos" for an all-Frank album due for release on the Naxos label in 2011. If the recorded rendition is half as good as the live performance, it will surely be regarded as definitive.

Frank wasn't the only composer at Alias' concert. Sparr, a gifted guitarist, joined Alias violinist Alison Gooding to perform his "Vim-Hocket, Calm" for electric guitar and amplified violin. Sparr said the great contemporary Dutch composer Louis Andriessen influenced his work. Andriessen often scores his works using instruments usually associated with rock 'n' roll. Sparr also found inspiration in the music of Charles Ives.

His "Vim-Hocket, Calm" is a short, episodic piece that alternates between lyrical passages and aggressive ones. Surprisingly, the electric guitar usually created the most soothing sounds, while the violin part was more angular and spiky. The complex ensemble writing included a slightly out-of-sync canon. To their credit, Sparr and Gooding gave a performance that was always tight, and, with the exception of a few intonation problems, mostly polished.

Bunch's "String Circle for Viola Quintet" turned out to be a real charmer. The piece paid homage to a variety of American folk styles such as old-time Appalachian fiddle music and Texas swing. The third movement, a lament for the late Johnny Cash, was a setting of "Wayfaring Stranger." It received a deeply felt performance.

De Leon's music usually reflects his Filipino heritage. Interestingly, his "Pandanguhan" for two violins, cello, bass and piano often sounded more Schubertian than Asian. Alias' musicians, including the composer's daughter Sari de Leon Reist on cello, gave the piece an elegant, refined and loving interpretation.



- [Eric England](#) photo
- Gabriela Lena Frank rehearsing