

Tennessean

Review: ALIAS' world premiere of 'Hilos' a joyous affair

By Evans Donnell • For The Tennessean • October 2, 2010

ALIAS Chamber Ensemble can do more than make good music: It can, for a time, alter the season and time of day. A cool fall evening became a warm spring afternoon on Friday with the world premiere of Gabriela Lena Frank's vibrant "Hilos" quartet. ALIAS' seasonal [concert](#) before more than 200 people in Blair School of Music's Turner Hall also featured the charming renewal of three carefully cultivated pieces.

Frank, a Guggenheim Fellow and Latin [Grammy winner](#), joined ALIAS at the piano for the first public performance of "Hilos," which ALIAS and Frank recorded recently for an upcoming Naxos CD.

Hilos is the Spanish word for threads. The piece consists of eight short movements (the longest runs about five minutes) and finishes in less than 30 minutes. In that short span, Frank on piano and ALIAS musicians on violin, cello and clarinet vividly weaved a rich South American-flavored musical textile by using various musical techniques to create the illusion of multiple instruments and voices.

The work began with Canto del Altiplano (Song of the Highlands): Frank's piano opened with tremolos, and the rapid reiteration created the feeling one might have viewing the morning mist clinging to a chain of mountains. The illusion of highland wind instruments that followed offered some fun-loving hints that the heart of "Hilos" is a light and happy one.

Then came Zapatos de Chincha (Shoes of Chincha), where clarinet and cello are featured and which has its genesis in the Afro-Peruano music and dance found in the small Peruvian coastal town of Chincha. Matt Walker's cello assumed the part of a wooden-box musical instrument called a cajón that's struck with hands and feet. His dexterity turned his stringed instrument into a precise percussion, creating a stirring tap-like beat.

After that was Charanguista Viejo (Old Charango Player). Zeneba Bowers' violin and Frank's piano transformed themselves sonically into a charango, a ukulele-like instrument traditionally constructed with an armadillo shell. But it was the searing effect of Bowers' melody line that led to one of the concert's most powerful moments. Listening to her, I could easily picture a well-worn old man performing songs he'd known since youth.

In quick succession came Danza de los Diablos (Devil Dance), an arresting mix of dissonance and boldness; Zumballyu (Spinning Top), in which Frank's piano created the spinning sensation associated with a children's toy; and Juegos (Games), in which Lee Levine's supple clarinet clearly conjured the image of a child being repeatedly teased by playmates.

Then it was time for the final two movements. Yaravillosa, a wordplay title that combines "maravillosa" (marvelous) and "yaravi" (an ancient Inca tune), combined the sliding effect of glissandi with more tremolos and some surges; it sounded almost like an opera singer was onstage. And the Bombines (Bowler Hats) finale provided a playful finish to "Hilos" that cheerfully saluted the Aymara women of the Bolivian and Peruvian highlands.

Folk music inspirations

Frank drew heavily of South American folklore in composing "Hilos," and the three selections that preceded her work on Friday also were inspired by [folk music](#). Two pieces drew folkloric inspiration from North America, while the third got its spark from the Philippines.

Composer D.J. Sparr played [electric guitar](#) on his “Vim-Hocket, Calm,” accompanied by ALIAS member Alison Gooding on amplified violin. The musical back-and-forth that ensued was striking, and provided an entertaining start to the concert.

Kenji Bunch’s “String Circle” for viola quintet is, among other things, a thoughtful tribute to American strings, from Appalachian fiddling to Texas swing and beyond. It’s a well-constructed five-movement affair with a beautiful third-movement lament to the late, great [Johnny Cash](#) that uses the folk song “Wayfaring Stranger” for its musical base.

The selection that immediately preceded “Hilos” was “Pandanguhan,” for two violins, cello, bass and piano, by Bayani Mendoza de Leon. Cellist Sari Reist told the audience her father originally wrote the piece with his family in mind as he determined the parts. The harmonically colorful homage to the Filipino version of Spain’s fandango was played with great verve and gaiety.