

REVIEW: Alias gets off to a moving start for new season

By EVANS DONNELL · For The Tennessean · October 10, 2008

Is there anything Alias can't play? The talented chamber music ensemble has been known for diversity and range since its 2002 founding and its enjoyable 2008-09 season opener Thursday was no exception.

Four selections dating from the 1880s to the 1990s were on the program: Andre Previn's Four Songs for soprano, piano, and cello (1994); Cesar Franck's Sonata in A major for violin and piano (1886); Vivian Fine's Sonatina for oboe and piano (1942); and Margaret Brouwer's "Crosswinds" for string quartet (1995).

The Oscar- and Grammy Award-winning Previn set music to four poems by Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison titled Mercy, Stones, Shelter and The Lacemaker.

The strong, crystal-clear soprano voice of Jennifer Coleman brought these poems to life accompanied by Christopher Stenstrom's vibrant cello and Susan Brown's lively piano. Their work was often surprising, sometimes heart-wrenching and absolutely engaging.

One of the best moments came during Stones, when Coleman sang, "My backbone ain't like his/But at least I got one." Her physical and vocal expressions during those lines, coupled with Stenstrom and Brown's emphatic playing, created more than just music — it fashioned a full character and story.

Next on the program was Franck's Sonata. This four-movement late-Romantic era composition is one infused with intense passion.

Violinist Zeneba Bowers and pianist Melissa Rose conveyed that passion so powerfully there were times, particularly in the Allegro second movement and the Allegretto poco mosso conclusion, when I felt they created a white-hot fire on stage that happily consumed us all.

After intermission Alias performed two pieces that kicked off its two-year "Emerging Voices" series. The series will spotlight women composers from the Baroque era to the present.

The first was Fine's Sonatina. This short three-movement piece requires transitions from traditional tonal sounds to those that are distinctly dissonant. Roger Wiesmeyer on oboe and Leah Bowes on piano handled these transitions beautifully.

The light and fast energy of the Allegro moderato opening was a fun start that also appropriately served to draw us quickly back to the concert following the interval. The Lento sostenuto and Allegretto movements that followed built on that enjoyable beginning and showed the musicians' range to good effect.

Crosswinds closed the performance. Brouwer's piece recreates the sounds — and sights — of Appalachian folk music and mountain life. The titles of its movements make the composer's intentions clear — Blue Ridges, Dappled Sunlight, Mountain Waltz; Dusk; and Oldtime Fiddles: High, Low, Lower.

Bowers, fellow violinist Rebecca Willie, viola player Keiko Nagayoshi and Matt Walker on cello gave us those sounds and sights so vividly one felt instantly transported to the time and place this work celebrates. The piece even calls for Willie to retune her instrument during the performance, and it was fascinating to watch and listen as she did so while her colleagues continued their terrific contributions.

The contract between performers and patrons succeeds when artists' full commitment to their work give audiences the joy of accepting that commitment. Alias delightfully fulfills that contract. These superb musicians love the diverse music they play, and it's a pleasure and privilege to be with them when they do it.