

Review: Alias gives fiery performance

By Jonathan Neufeld · For The Tennessean · February 13, 2009

Alias's winter concert on Thursday night continued the chamber ensemble's tradition of exciting programming and excellent playing. The program included a two contributions to their "Emerging Voices: Women Composers Past and Present" series.

First was a little piece, *Manhattan Serenades*, for cello and piano by contemporary composer Gabriela Lena Frank, whose works have been played in recent years by both the Nashville Symphony and Alias.

The first and last movements, "Uptown" and "Downtown" showcased cellist Matt Walker's light touch and improvisational skills. Combined with Melissa Rose's sprightly accompaniment, the gently angular and jazzy piece came off well. The second movement was touching and ended in such a contemplative mood that it felt a bit out of place between the two more playful movements. In fact, it made the cheer of the opening of the last movement sound almost forced.

The second emerging voice was that of Lili Boulanger. Her coloristic but propulsive *D'un Matin de Printemps* for violin and piano was crisply played by Rose and violist Allison Gooding.

Antonín Dvořák's string quintet does not explore the startling array of sounds that stringed instruments can make, but it does luxuriate in melody.

The work's unusual addition of a string bass, sensitively played by Kristen Bruya, has the effect not only of adding depth and power to the small group, but also of setting the lower and middle voices of Michael Samis's cello and Judith Ablon's viola into sharper relief. Samis's shining and expressive playing further highlighted the prominent melodic role of the cello. Louise Morrison's warm and pure tone on first violin was well suited to Dvořák's long, soloistic passages.

In the slow second movement, there is a gorgeous moment between the first and second violin (played by Keiko Nagayoshi) that sounds like a brief snippet of a vocal duet. As it passed fleetingly by, I thought for a moment that I wished they would have stretched the tempo out a bit more. But then I realized that I just wanted the well-played moment to last longer. Differently articulated detached dotted rhythms robbed a few passages of the final movement of some of their forward motion. This was, happily, quickly regained in the singing, melodic passages and maintained through the festive finale.

Apparently the playing of Zeneba Bowers, Jeremy Williams, Chris Farrell, and Chris Stenstrom was too hot to be heard all at once. In the middle of the intricate and brilliantly executed pizzicato 4th movement of Béla Bartók's 4th string quartet, the final piece of the night, the fire alarm in Turner Recital Hall went off. Audience and quartet waited in the chill outside while the fire department checked the building. Heroically, the quartet returned to the hall after a long pause and played the 4th and 5th movements to finish the evening's concert in a blaze of glory. (I'm told the actual cause of the alarm was a burnt piece of toast.)

Alias brought out the full expressive range of Bartók's extraordinary quartet. The piece is variously touching, frantic, angry and funny. Each movement has complex interlocking parts that, when played well, sometimes sound like a musical argument, sometimes like a sort of complex and animated machine with a sense of humor and a tendency to startle. Pizzicato exploded from Farrell's viola and Williams' syncopated chords were vigorously and gratifyingly crunchy. In the third movement, Stenstrom's cello sang and Bowers' made palpable the tiniest melodic movements from her violin.

Listening to chamber music in a small hall, played well, is like no other classical music experience. You hear and feel the materiality of the instruments that Bartók exploits and of which Alias has an exquisite sense.

The standing ovation would have been well deserved even without the musicians' fiery perseverance.