

Imani Winds

Imani Winds show sass and fluency in a repertoire spanning continents

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The Imani Winds would seem to have all the ingredients necessary for success in this post-modern, crossover-happy musical universe. Its five members look good, speak with articulate finesse on behalf of their repertoire and take evident pleasure in the act of performance. Oh, and by the way, they play splendidly.

On Tuesday night, the Imani — who take their name from the Swahili word for "faith" — gave a recital at the University of Louisville School of Music. The quintet's members are flutist and native Louisvillian Valerie Coleman, oboist Toyin Spellman, clarinetist Mariam Adam, hornist Jeff Scott and bassoonist Monica Ellis. They are a deliberately eclectic group, embracing works from multiple genres and perspectives, unafraid to bend and tweak tradition when it suits their collective purpose.

The Imani came to town as an extension of a Fischhoff Chamber Music Association residency in South Bend, Ind. Eager to acknowledge her Louisville roots, Coleman brought her colleagues to the School of Music's Comstock Hall to play before an audience that included a healthy — and vociferous — sprinkling of family and friends.

What they heard was music reflecting influences from Africa and the Caribbean, from the skewed New Viennese perspective of Alexander von Zemlinsky to the bluesy riffs of Gunther Schuller. To every idiom they brought insight and fluency, wrapped in a gentle imperative that urged listeners to share their pleasures of ongoing discovery.

Coleman's own Concerto for Wind Quintet and Orchestra, heard Tuesday in an arrangement that cast members as participants in a kind of concerto grosso, proved a particularly effective means of highlighting their mutual abilities. Believe me, you're going to look very hard to find a bassoonist who plays with as much sass as Ellis did in this piece. It was a vehicle for unabashed display that managed as well to claim accompanying substance.

So did Scott's "Homage to Duke," which cannily rethreaded Ellington's sacred vocal quartet "Come Sunday" into a lushly hued, almost melancholy instrumental version that preserved the essential spiritual flavor of the original.

I sensed a bit of reticence in the Imani's account of Zemlinsky's Humoresque, an admittedly slender piece to begin with. More enticing were performances of a three-movement Schuller suite boasting a terrific central Blues indulgence full of brash portamento effects, followed by Mario Lavista's "Cinco Danzas Breves," which impressed with the close harmonic structure of its slow fourth movement bridging deftly to the abbreviated quickness of its fifth.

Any way you regard them, the Imani Winds' members understand how to make their scores sound relevant to the moment at hand.