



Think Classical Music is Always the Same? Think Again.

by Kim Millett

The man sitting next to me at the first concert asked, "Is it always the same? I mean, do they always play the same music the same way?"

His go-to music is Latin jazz. He's used to listening for improvisation over a montuno, a short piano vamp that repeats a pattern of syncopated rhythms. But he had a friend's ticket to hear his first FCM concert, and the Pacifica Quartet's way of realizing established works puzzled him. "It's written down, right? So can they ever change anything?"

I hope he comes back for the October 13th concert, because Sharon Isbin and the Calidore String Quartet will answer his question brilliantly. Yes, the music is written down, and yes, the guitarist and the quartet will honor the composers' markings. Together they will begin and end with Baroque music by Vivaldi and Boccherini, and separately Isbin will play solo Spanish and South American pieces before the quartet explores Haydn's swinging Op. 76 No. 5 and Dvořák's soulful "American" Quartet.

The parts have been printed, and yet every concert is different. Why is that?

Isbin, a master of the guitar who has had 80 works written for her, says "The performance is different every night. For one thing, the Baroque was the jazz age. The guitarist was expected to improvise, to add embellishments. If a section is repeated, I play it straight the first time and embellish it the second, and the quartet adds trills at certain cadences."

If visual cues are important to you, watch for Isbin's strumming hand and plucking fingernails to move up the fingerboard for soft passages and down the instrument to "whack the strings in a way that is elegant" when necessary. "Hmmm," she said, "I've never said that before, but that's what I do." And she uses a device designed especially for her: a volume knob attached to the edge of her chair to raise or lower the volume of her instrument between movements. It controls the microphone she uses when playing with the quartet to balance the sound of four bowed instruments with her acoustic guitar.

When the Calidore String Quartet launches into Haydn or Dvořák, listen for the changes of tone color and emphasis that make you feel different moods. It takes two additional instruments to make those moods: the hall and the audience. "We have very fond memories of playing in Denver at Gates Hall," said violinist Ryan Meehan. "Being in that beautiful space, feeling the energy of a full house, made us rise to the occasion."

During his fifteen years with the quartet, the Calidore's performances of well-known works have changed fundamentally. "In the beginning, we competed in a lot of competitions and planned everything, crossed every t and dotted every i. But after our first concert season we realized that approach was not creatively sustainable. Now we give ourselves established guidelines about mood and color for each phrase but also consider multiple ways it can develop. We then default to this or that person to lead the way in how we express a certain passage. My parts are littered with my colleagues' names, so I know where to, for example, support Jeremy or look for a cue from Jeffrey."

Isbin echoes Meehan's enthusiasm for the Denver audience. "Every performance is different," she said. "I'm totally immersed in the music myself, and if the audience gets into the music too, they become part of the performance. I love the energy in Denver, and playing with the texture of four bowed instruments is a whole new world for me. I can't wait for the Fandango we play at the end. Boccherini had a very sensuous side, and the audience goes bananas!"

Indeed, the great lover Casanova described the Fandango in his memoir as an "expression of love from its beginning to its end, from the sigh of desire to the ecstasy of possession."

The audience matters. Come, and be a player!

Calidore String Quartet with Sharon Isbin, guitar

MON, OCT 13 | 7:30 PM

Gates Concert Hall, Newman Center for the Performing Arts