



The Wanderer

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Fireworks' Funky Fusion Explodes at Tabor Academy

As the eight members of the New York-based Fireworks Ensemble took the stage at Tabor Academy's Hoyt Performing Arts Center on Friday evening, February 8, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The group of young musicians looked every bit the part of a chamber ensemble readying themselves to perform a repertoire of Strauss, Haydn and Lully.

The instruments looked innocent enough -- winds, percussion keyboard and strings. The ensemble dressed in red, black or a combination of the two -- nothing too flashy for these very serious young performers. As the group counted off the time and began to play their first piece, Strauss' Thunder and Lightning Polka, there it was ... the first hint that this was not going to be an ordinary night of music. This was going to be different, maybe even something special. "Mommy, look at those pants," said a little girl in the fourth row as she pointed to cellist Leigh Stuart.

Ms. Stuart was wearing a pair of chrome red leather pants that looked as if they had been lifted from a New York Dolls publicity photo circa 1974. Not your typical attire for a classically-trained cellist, but Fireworks is no ordinary chamber ensemble. While the musicians may have honed their considerable skills on Stravinsky and Bach, they collectively would show the audience that great music can come from any number of sources, not just long-dead European composers.

As bassist and ensemble director Brian Coughlin began to introduce the evening's third piece, he broke into a bit of a wry smile and said, "Okay, we'd like to play some techno music now," as he went on to explain that the band was about to perform a piece by '90s artist Aphex Twin. Mr. Coughlin continued, "It was Duke Ellington who said, 'There are two kinds of music: good music and the other kind.' Fireworks tries to live by that philosophy."

With that they did, indeed, play techno music -- not your teenager's or twenty-something's techno. This was techno turned on its head by world-class players who seem to thoroughly enjoy defying convention in the name of digging into the details of a composition to find the heart and soul of each piece of music they choose to play. In the case of the Aphex Twin song, "Analogue Bubblebath," Fireworks took a piece of music that had been created entirely with electronic instruments and computers and turned it into something completely original, playing the number entirely with acoustic instruments. The effect was a stunningly beautiful piece of music that straddled the chasm between the new and the old.

Throughout the rest of the evening the group performed a concert of dance music originating from nearly every continent, from forms and traditions as varied as Afro-pop, New Wave/Punk, Big Band Jazz, Calypso and Disco, just to name a few. With each number the ensemble seemed to push itself to find new ways and means to wrench sounds from their instruments that most musicians never dream of making.

At various times throughout the evening pianos were made to sound like zithers and dulcimers by sticking pencils between the strings to give the instrument a raspy and ringing sound. Flutes and violins borrowed the voices of Caribbean steel drums, cellos and guitars filled in for the scratching of a hip-hop turntable and penny whistles, kazoos and every other instrument on stage were used to recreate the sounds of synthesizers and computers as the band moved seamlessly between Ellington, New Order, Haydn, the Bee Gees and Aaron Copland.

The performance was a part of Tabor Academy's ongoing Maxwell Concert Series. If you would like to know more about Fireworks Ensemble's work, you can find them on the web at www.fireworksensemble.org.

By Robert Chiarito