

Classically Latin

BY: STEVE GLADSTONE ON NOVEMBER 20, 2013. MIAMIARTZINE.COM

When one thinks of Classical music and its genome, the mind first turns to Europe, where “modern music” was born.

Since the 17th century, top shelf composers around the globe have taken the European traditions established by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and their ilk, absorbed and infused those methods and forms into their indigenous music.

The South Beach Chamber Ensemble recently brought Latin spun classical music to an intimate south Florida audience, spotlighting composers Villa-Lobos, Piazzolla, and Romero. The native environs of the Miami Beach Botanical Garden was the backdrop for the afternoon concert, presented by the spirited players of the SBCE – Luis Fernandez (violin), Tony Seepersad (violin), Rafael Ramirez (viola), and Michael Andrews (cello).

Heitor Villa-Lobos, arguably the most significant Latin American classical composer of the 20th century, spent his musical life reconciling the folk music of his native Brazil with the European styles. His String Quartet No. 3 is such a work, the “lost gem” supremely rendered by SBCE.

All four voices began in conversation, Seepersad’s violin soon in dialogue with Andrews’s cello. The six note theme was at once swarming and then discordant. Seepersad continued soaring, Ramirez beautifully handled a feature in the center, and the foursome drew the first movement to a tidy close.

The Scherzo, Pipocas (Popcorn), was as interesting as it was lively, the quartet plucking with both their right and left hands to create the effect of its title. The violin, viola and cello kept individually ‘popping’ through the vigorous group pizzicato, all driven and frenetic, causing the lads to retune before commencing with the third.

Slowing it down, Seepersad played a soft wandering melody accompanied by plucked harmonics. Andrews then took a sweetened turn with the motif. The movement had a delightful Eastern feel to it. The glass walls of the Botanical Garden hall framed a father out in the gardens tossing his young son in the air while the mother took pictures – a fitting portrait to this calming third movement.

The furious opening to the finale was a sprint, the voices scooping and distinctive in a full out conversation. Seepersad and Fernandez teamed up for a bold drive, Ramirez spoke up on his viola, and the foursome stirred the melody to its

substantial conclusion.

Seepersad switched chairs with Fernandez as first violin, Tango Ballet by Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla becoming Fernandez's first assignment. Piazzolla, a master of sudden twists and turns, keeps the listener characteristically off-balance in this five movement piece. Fernandez opened with a cascading downward violin marked by a jarring syncopated rhythm, which, without warning, instantly morphed into signature Piazzolla progressive descending melodic phrases. Andrews (who played with Piazzolla in the early 1980s with the Orquesta Filarmonica de Caracas) led the group through a dissonant passage, and just as it appeared that all would become chaotic, the quartet broke out into a jaunty street dance, both violins scurrying across the backdrop, a theme that could easily underscore a Warner Bros cartoon. After a brief transition, Fernandez emerged with a lovely plaintive melody, evocatively traversing the landscape, filling the hall with honest emotion. Andrew's cello started slowly advancing as Ramirez took a full-bodied turn with the melancholy melody. The quartet bloomed again into Piazzolla's signature descending footprint; Fernandez returned to and elaborated the wistful melody, blissfully ascending into the atmosphere. The transition back to the street dance brought the end to this short piece that covered so much musical territory.

The instantly recognizable "El Manisero" ("The Peanut Vendor"), famously recorded in 1930 by Don Azpiazú and his Havana Casino Orchestra, is a tune based on a pregón (street-seller's cry). It caused a 'rumba craze' in the US and Europe, introducing listeners to "Cuban percussion instruments and Cuban rhythms."

Alex Berti (double bass) joined the quartet for Manisero Fantasy, arranged for SBCE in 2012 by Al Torrente. Ramirez started slapping his viola with his hands, Andrews and Berti then joined him, tapping the front and top of their instruments, every player adding to the percussion. The quintet bowed up and played the buoyant booty shaking tune, the melody moving spritely from voice to voice. Andrews blew an authentic samba whistle, launching a contagious samba beat, all five instruments crying the popular melody. They returned to drumming on their ax, Berti taking a final solo turn with the familiar phrase.

Aldemaro Romero, Venezuelan composer, conductor and pianist, was A Latin Gershwin of sorts, comfortable writing popular, jazz and classical music. His daughter, Ruby Romero de Issaev, and his granddaughter, Patricia Laine Alvarado, were happy to be on hand for SBCE's final opus for the afternoon, Romero's Fuga con Pajarillo.

Romero, like Villa-Lobos, based his work on folkloric themes blended with classical modes. He took the joropo (a native Venezuelan musical style and dance resembling the waltz) and layered it into a classic counterpoint, the result electrifying.

At the top of Fuga, Seepersad, Ramirez and Fernandez fell in line, one by one, enunciating, combining and contrasting several different themes simultaneously, Andrews and Berti falling in behind them. All the players quickly stirred their unique melodies into one pot.

These five distinctive voices, separate and together, filled every molecule of air in the hall, and round and round we went. Sounds complicated? Not really – if you're listening to it. It's called a fugue, and J. S. Bach was the granddaddy of the exhilarating form.

The counterpoint was sublime in Romero's notes and in the hands of the SBCE.

The texture took on an Afro-Latino beat, which continued to drive the independent voices. A three note plucking suddenly peppered the contrapuntal brew. Several times during the piece, a single voice would articulate a simple melody, the family falling in behind it, one by one, gradually building toward a complex sound. Berti maintained the floor as Fernandez's violin went on a distinctly Latin excursion, topping out as the quintet fugued to the climax and the finale.

The audience leaped to their feet in appreciation.

In their 17th season, SBCE's mission is envisioning "a world where music inspires and energizes all people, creating peace, harmony, joy and unprecedented satisfaction in being alive."

Mission accomplished.

You can experience the classical vibe of the SBCE in their upcoming "To Russia, With Love" program. For this and the rest of their eclectic season, check out:

www.sobechamberensemble.org