

The Bergonzi Quartet romps with Saint-Saens's 'Carnival'

Group makes use of some unusual instruments

By Lawrence Budmen

Camille Saint-Saens's "Carnival of the Animals" has long been an orchestral showpiece. Verses have been added to it by Ogden Nash and Martin Bookspan. It has become a staple of the children's concert repertoire. Now violist Pamela McConnell has made a new transcription for string quartet plus some unusual instruments. This new version was premiered by the Bergonzi String Quartet on Sept. 30 at a Festival Miami concert at UM's Gusman Hall.

McConnell's new take on Saint-Saens's classic was a total delight. The string writing has both wit and style. She has reduced the full orchestration to just four instruments with ingenuity, musicality, and inventiveness. The composer's charming musical vision is not short changed. Along the way the players make lion and bird noises. At one point violinist Glenn Basham played a harmonica (to fill in the orchestral texture). Later Basham switched from his violin to a musical saw which made some eerie effects in a surprisingly imaginative way. McConnell

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played an alto recorder for the "Cuckoo" sound while walking through the audience. She also played a synthesizer skillfully in the "Fossiles" movement. (Indeed McConnell proved to be a striking comedienne.) Cellist Ross Harbaugh had his turn playing a kazoo in place of a double bass. Violinist Scott Flavin joined his colleagues at the keyboard to share the "Pianists" section. Their skill at the piano and showbiz flair brought to mind Victor Borge. And why not? Why shouldn't concerts be fun? Art and humor can be combined. This version of "Carnival of the Animals" combines musical integrity and creativity with great entertainment. The Bergonzi Quartet has come up with a winner and has broken new ground for the string quartet medium. The performance was wonderfully light, bright, and witty. Harbaugh played "The Swan" with beautiful singing tone and nobility of musical line.

Antonin Dvorak's radiant
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"Quartet in E flat Major," Opus 51 was given a gem of a performance by the Bergonzi players. This is Bohemian folk music transplanted to soaring Brahmsian strings.

The opening Allegro ma non troppo was warmly lyrical with Basham and Flavin's violins playing with luminous, streaming tone. The Andante con motto was all romantic glow with McConnell's viola and Harbaugh's cello offering deep toned richness.

The Furiant that followed had joyous verve, while the concluding Allegro assai was full of dance like effervescence. The blending and balance of the four instruments was beautifully accomplished. There was a welcome lack of musical exaggeration.

The lovely glow of Dvorak's music had a wonderful ebb and flow that permeated every note of the performance. This Dvorak performance set a new high water mark for the musicians. The concert opened with an intense rendering of Beethoven's "Quartet in F Minor," Opus 95 ("Serioso"). This is late Beethoven with heaven storming romanticism everywhere in evidence, occasionally interrupted by disturbing harmonic changes.

In the second movement Allegretto ma non troppo the violins caught the tension and the broken musical line with expressive dramatic utterance. The concluding Allegretto agitato had fervor and passion aplenty, which made Beethoven's sudden shift to a major key for the rousing conclusion all the more striking.

Here the musicians played with all the vigor that the composer summoned up for these surprising final pages. It was a performance that was true to the spirit of the music and the composer.

The Bergonzi String Quartet is a resident ensemble at the UM School of Music. In this concert its members skillfully mixed the serious, the witty, and the warmly beautiful for a fine "musical offering."

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