

Synthesis of Sound

Stephanie L. Smith | Posted: Sunday, October 24, 2004 12:00 am

It's typical for rare gems to go unnoticed when relying upon the traditional classical music outlets that Cincinnati provides. Such is the case with the Queen City Virtuosi.

The string ensemble, based at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, opened the 19th season of Concerts Saturday night at Raymond Walters College.

Queen City Virtuosi formed in March 2003 with its players hailing from China, France, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States. The group, all in their mid-20s, were eager to play, as evident by the smiles on their faces throughout the performance. Pianist Omar Herrera-Arizmendi joined them as special guest. He debuted in the music world at age nine in Mexico, then pursued studies at the University of Texas at Austin and the Shepherd School of Music-Rice University of Houston.

The evening began with "Intermezzo" from Cavalleria Rusticana by Pietro Mascagni. The opera was written in 1890 and was Mascagni's first success, which overshadowed many of his later works. The piece, albeit short, was a mixture of solemn beauty tinged with regret.

The program included two other works: Mozart's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 9" and Tchaikovsky's "Serenade in C for Strings".

Mozart was only 21 when he composed the "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra". The Queen City Virtuosi and Herrera-Arizmendi achieved a perfect mixture with neither overpowering the other, and provided a deep, sorrowful journey, ending with playful teasing. The strings had the essence of a gentle breeze, while Herrera-Arizmendi possessed a natural ease at the piano.

The "Serenade in C for Strings" is a perfect example of Tchaikovsky done well, as he can manage to do smaller pieces, but fails at doing longer, more involved symphonies. The cellos created a subtle sense of urgency throughout with the violins contributing a spiraling effect, leading to a wistful waltz.

Conductor Jungho Kim offered little direction. It was as though he was only an insurance policy, there to guide the ensemble back if they strayed off their musical path.

The larger musical organizations in the area love to perform Mozart and Tchaikovsky; it's almost as though it's a requirement. For smaller groups, such as the Queen City Virtuosi, this would be a perfect opportunity to explore pieces by lesser known or modern composers.

Unfortunately, the venue did little to compliment the peaceful music. The small theater made the

performance more intimate, but exaggerated audience sounds. Whispers seemed like screams; candy wrappers became echoes; wet squeaky shoes (a result of Saturday night's rain) felt like nails on a blackboard. It bordered on frustration as the Queen City Virtuosi - and any small ensemble, for that matter - should be shown the same respect as larger groups such as the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra or the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Yet one has to search-or, in this case, sit - through the rough to find the diamond, and it was indeed worthwhile.

The next concert at RWC features Lilly Abreu, who will perform Latin and Brazilian love songs, 8 p.m., Dec. 4.

Tickets, \$9, go on sale three weeks before performances and parking is free. Visit www.rwc.uc.edu for updates.