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Conquering the Americas, but softly

Ronen Chamber Ensemble presents a program of varied origin and charm

By Jay Harvey
jay.harvey@indystar.com

You can sound many notes to get across the idea of conquest that has shaped the Americas, but the Ronen Chamber Ensemble followed a quieter course Tuesday night.

Perhaps co-founders David Bellman and Ingrid Fischer-Bellman took a hint from the piece they had written for them, John Berners' "Common American Phrases." Its first movement is titled "The Road Not Taken," after the Robert Frost poem.

In any case, the program "took the road less traveled by," opting to tread lightly. And in the commissioned work, Berners, a second-year composer on the faculty of the University of Indianapolis, cajoles his muse softly even when he wants her to salute his hero, the typically rambunctious Charles Ives.

Thus, the third movement of "Common American Phrases," a trio for clarinet, cello and percussion, uses the glockenspiel to state a dissonant countermelody against the cello's lyricism. Its tinkle barely recalls, as if in a dream, the brash distractions Ives liked to conjure up.

The first movement was most substantial, drawing the listener past opening tremolos into a nicely laid-out exposition of vivid trio textures that got denser before returning to the initial shimmer.

The middle movement was a juvenile joke, and woe betide anyone who fully outgrows those! Titled "Where's Bobo?" after a favorite stuffed animal of the composer's toddler son, it set a cheeky caricature of early bebop for cello and clarinet skittering atop the propulsive underpinning of a toy drum set.

We were in for cultivated enchantment from the start, as Bellman played the unaccompanied "Rhapsody for Clarinet" by Wilson Osborne. It's an eight-minute excursion through mildly exotic territory, testing the expressiveness of the player. Given the player, it was no surprise that the test was dispatched with ease. Only some reedy ghost tones, fitfully harassing from the sidelines, marred the performance.

Fischer-Bellman was joined by flutist Tamara Thweatt for "The Jet Whistle" by Heitor Villa-Lobos. Like many scores by Brazil's chief composer, this one overstays its welcome. The appeal of its buoyant, folksy material is paper-thin, but happily the performance did everything possible to keep Villa-Lobos' gaucheness at bay.

Polish-American composer Robert Muczynski's Fantasy Trio, op. 26, kept the program from floating away while not disturbing the mood. As pianist Richard Ratliff indicated in oral program notes before playing it with Bellman and Fischer-Bellman, influences of major composers parade boldly through the 15-minute work. The musicians' winning rapport settled any unease about the piece's derivative quality.

Additional Facts

Music of the Americas

Who: Ronen Chamber Ensemble.

When: Tuesday night.

Where: Wood Room, Hilbert Circle Theatre.

Bottom line: A smattering of hemispheric charm.
