



Xavier Foley, *double bassist*

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Off the Chain: Sphinx Virtuosi at Bailey Hall

Tyran Grillo | *The Cornell Daily Sun* | October 2, 2016

On Friday night, the Sphinx Virtuosi – in collaboration with (and under leadership of) the Catalyst Quartet – presented their Latin Voyages: Viajes Latinos program. The result was one of the finest concerts I've seen at Cornell.

Coming up on its 20th anniversary, the Sphinx Organization places young Black and Latino classical soloists on the world's most prestigious stages – not least Carnegie Hall, where since 2006 they have held annual residency. But while there is an activist charge to the group's ideological foundations, it all comes down to the quality of performance, style and selection. In those regards the virtuosi transcended racial and cultural barriers, owning a space that would pass even the stodgiest inspection.

If anything was clear from a blindfold test, it was the group's age, as these prodigious artists brought a youthful verve to every piece they touched. The strains of Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla provided natural touchpoints in a journey that took the audience by turns to Mexico, Brazil, Spain and back to Argentina. Piazzolla's *Libertango*, as arranged by Thomas Kalb, introduced the Sphinx Virtuosi as a force to be reckoned with. Not only did they imbue this familiar melody with premiere freshness, but also embodied it with the range of their abilities, combining a soaring overlay with a jagged underlay as if one depended on the other. This *yin-and-yang* approach served the musicians as they leapt into the *Primera Suite Argentina* of Alberto Williams, a four-movement suite based on folk motifs that vacillated between concert hall and open fields, and the urban sprawl of Javier Álvarez's *Metro Chabacano*. The latter piece, named for a Mexico City transportation hub, was a highlight for its modern realism and logical resolutions of half-tone dissonances.

Violinist Hannah White, Sphinx Competition 2015 Junior Division 1st Place Laureate, rent the cloth of expectation with her incisive rendition of the *Prélude Ibérique* by lesser-known Spanish composer César Espejo, whose maze of sudden key changes and knuckle-busting double stops resolved into a linear path at White's fingertips. The music itself – indebted to Paganini and, by extension, Bach – was a treat to hear live and proved a studied choice on the part of its performer. The Aria from Heitor Villa-Lobos's popular *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5 was the first of two loving arrangements by the Catalyst Quartet. This was the prettier of them, and gave each of the higher strings a spotlight as the theme grew viral. The fullness of its mosaic effect was heightened as the quartet blended into its take on Piazzolla's *La muerte del Ángel*, which showcased an imaginative array of stomps, taps and even a shrill whistle hung from cellist Karlos Rodriguez's neck that made this rhythmic puzzle all the more enjoyable to put together.

After winning our trust with such solid crowd-pleasers, the Sphinxes got down to business, closing out the concert with two formidable giants. *Last Round*, composed for two string quartets and double bass, was composer Osvaldo Golijov's reconceptualization of the bandoneon, a concertina that was Piazzolla's primary instrument, and was a dueling tango meant to redress its dedicatee in postmodern clothing. Following this was the *Concerto per corde*, op. 33 of Piazzolla's first composition teacher, Alberto Ginastera. Ginastera's folk idioms exuded from a central violin, drawing out from the surrounding strings a forested language that was equal parts fairytale and autobiography. Unforgettable was double bassist Xavier Foley's wrenching solo, which barreled with cadenza-like vitality into a ferocious finish.

Lest these closing pieces deter those who'd come to dance, a more percussive reprisal of *Libertango* as encore brought it all full circle. The end effect was downright cinematic, placing us in a lush environment that was every bit as vivid as watching a film in 3D.

So did we live for two hours in this music, so that it might live in us for countless more.