



NEWS *from Young Concert Artists, Inc.*



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Carnegie Hall presents Laureates of the Sphinx Competition in Review

XAVIER FOLEY, BASS; ELENA URIOSTE, VIOLIN;
GABRIEL CABEZAS, CELLO; TOM POSTER, PIANO

ZANKEL HALL AT CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK, NY MAY 3, 2018

Zankel Hall was the venue for a special concert entitled Laureates of the Sphinx Competition on May 3, 2018. Founded by Aaron P. Dworkin to address the underrepresentation of people of color in classical music, the Sphinx Organization is dedicated to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts. Their programs focus on four main principles: education and access, artist development, performing artists, and arts leadership. One can learn more about this outstanding organization by visiting www.sphinxmusic.org. The artists presented, in addition to being fine musicians, have dedicated themselves to furthering the mission of music by spearheading their own groups.

Before anything else, I would like to take the time to mention the excellent program notes, which not only gave both “at a glance” and detailed explanations of the works, but biographical information about the composers and the performance histories of the works. There are many performers who feel that program notes are unnecessary and even chide the reviewer for making it an issue! This is missing the point that audiences are not all experts (and not all so-called “experts” know everything either!), and that to leave the listeners without explanations risks leaving them feeling lost or frustrated. The opportunity to educate is lost, and those left behind will perceive classical music as elitist. One cannot bemoan dwindling attendance levels while failing to do the utmost to make listeners want to return.

Bassist Xavier Foley’s 2016 composition *Cranberry Juice* (a New York premiere) was inspired by the music from *StarCraft*, a real-time strategy game. Mr. Foley writes that his work features 90’s alt-rock sounds with the slightest dash of R&B. A quote from *The Simpsons* theme song from the earlier solo version was removed due to possible legal issues. D’oh! *Cranberry Juice* **is a fun trip, with frenzied moments delivered by Mr. Foley in a playful way. He is an extroverted performer and a real crowd-pleaser; it is almost as enjoyable to watch him play as to hear him. Two works by Reinhold Glière, *Intermezzo*, Op 9, No.1, and *Tarantella*, Op.9, No. 2 showed Mr. Foley’s technical prowess. It’s no mean feat to navigate the rapid passagework on the bass without blurred, muddy sounds and to maintain a singing tone in the higher range, but Mr. Foley made it all look like child’s play.**

(continues)

Cellist Gabriel Cabezas led off with Robert Schumann's *Fünf Stücke im Volkston* (Five Pieces in Folk Style), Op. 102, with pianist Tom Poster. Schumann was a master of small forms, and this work is no exception. One sees both his Florestan (1,4, and 5) and Eusebius (2 and 3) personalities in this work. While I found Mr. Cabezas to be technically assured with a warm, rich tone, it was the slower works (2,3) that this listener found to be the most compelling, showing Mr. Cabezas to be a sensitive artist who digs deep into the emotional depths of Schumann without making it overly-sentimental or mawkish.

Violinist Elena Urioste and Mr. Poster followed with two works: Olivier Messiaen's *Theme and Variations* (1932) and Amy Beach's *Romance*, Op. 23. The Messiaen was mesmerizing; Ms. Urioste's extreme upper register was crystalline, and, combined with Mr. Poster's attentiveness to balance, the performance was everything one would hope for. The building in intensity of each successive variation was thrilling. The Beach *Romance* was lush as one might expect, but also a virtuosic showpiece that showed that Ms. Urioste "has the goods" and can wow an audience. Again Mr. Poster is to be lauded for his superb work, in what was consistently excellent throughout the concert.

Ms. Urioste, Mr. Cabezas, and Mr. Poster took the stage for the World Premiere of *Divertimento* (2018), commissioned by the Sphinx Organization from composer Gabriella Smith (b. 1991). Ms. Smith writes she was inspired by the "quirkiness" of Haydn and the Scherzo from Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony. Complete with extended techniques, pitch bends, and other noises, it featured "special guest appearances" of themes from Papa Haydn and Beethoven, which peeked in as if the players were naughty children, only to have them return to creating mischief when they turned away. It was the product of a highly imaginative and talented up-and-coming composer. Ms. Smith was in attendance and rose to greet the players and the audience to accept the well-earned applause.

Ms. Urioste spoke briefly to thank Sphinx and Carnegie Hall, but also to explain some of the thoughts behind the concert. Diversity not just of skin color, but of gender, country of origin, and musical style, was considered, as well as the presentation of living composers. Ms. Urioste then said that, "we don't need to talk about it, but just do it" – to some laughter. The message was clear; talk is nice, but action is better.

Maurice Ravel's 1914 Piano Trio in A minor, completed at the end of August, the first month of World War One, was the final work on the program. It is not surprising that the events of the day had an influence on Ravel ("[I am] working with the assurance and clarity of a madman," he wrote to a friend), and the end result is a work filled with strife, but also mournful majesty. I was wondering if these young players would fully grasp the pathos of Ravel's conception and also be able to navigate the considerable difficulties that Ravel placed upon all three players. I should have not feared a thing, as this was one of the best performances of this work I have heard. It was the highlight for this listener, and the audience seemed to second that notion, judging by the extended standing ovation awarded to the players.

Mr. Cabezas humorously vamped as his partners tracked down Mr. Foley for an encore. A charming arrangement by Mr. Poster of Manuel Ponce's *Estrellita* (as transcribed by Heifetz) was a lovely ending to a great evening of music. Keep up the good work, Sphinx – I look forward to hearing more from your fine organization!

by Jeffrey Williams for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

<http://nyconcertreview.com/reviews/carnegie-hall-presents-laureates-of-the-sphinx-competition-in-review/>