

Review: Exotic sounds in the Aspen Music tent

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ASPEN – Tablas, banjos and hyper-accordions do not usually appear on programs at the Aspen Music Festival, but what a refreshing and dazzling change of pace they provided this week. The sheer virtuosity of masters such as Zakir Hussain (tabla), Béla Fleck (banjo) and Michael Ward-Bergeman (hyper-accordion) puts them in that rarefied place where classical finds harmony with the rest of the musical world.

That's what string bass king Edgar Meyer has been doing with his annual recitals here, which in recent years have paired him with mandolinist Chris Thile and, most memorably, an entire concert with jazz bassist Christian McBride. It may be disconcerting to a classical audience not to have a program to refer to, but the quality of the music-making and the boundaries explored deliver rewards aplenty.

So it was with Wednesday's long concert in the tent, which reunited Meyer with his Nashville musical partner Fleck, who can play Bach on his banjo and make it sound right. It also introduced the mind-blowing talents of Hussain to the Aspen audience. He coaxed an array of timbres and pitches from an array of drums, all the while toying with rhythm, pitch, and spinning off complex curlicues of percussion that somehow never strayed from the beat.

Adding Hussain to the bluegrass-tinged pairing of Meyer and Fleck is like adding coriander, chili peppers, ginger, garlic and turmeric to American fried chicken and grits. It turns the flavor in a whole different direction. At times the banjo seemed to stand in for a sitar, the bass contributing the drone of the oud. At other times, the result evoked jazz as improvisations whirled in unexpected directions.

About half the pieces on the program were written for a recording session with the Detroit Symphony and conductor Leonard Slatkin which featured a triple concerto. "What struck me is how natural these three instruments were together," Slatkin, an Aspen regular, told me. "It is like a bizarre jazz trio, with the tabla taking the role of the bass, the bass being the melodic center and the banjo becoming both drums and keyboards." Actually, that would be a quartet, but at times they did sound like one.

Meyer fulfilled his obligation for a solo on "his" recital by playing the prelude of the Bach Cello Suite No. 2 alone. Amplification on his bass made it sound harsher than it does without the benefit of microphones, but the electronics were probably necessary to balance three instruments that no one ever expected to play together. Perhaps only these three could pull it off.

A piece for unusual instruments and orchestra also played a role in bringing together cellist Alisa Weilerstein, hyper-accordionist Ward-Bergeman and percussionists Jamey Haddad and Keita Ogawa. They performed Osvaldo Golijov's "Azul" on tour last year. That piece in Aspen was one of the highlights at the music festival two summers ago, and the soloists did not want to leave it at that. They met again to work on Golijov's score last fall for Francis Ford Coppola's new film, "Tetro."

The fruits of that collaboration were on display in the second half of Weilerstein's recital in Harris Hall Tuesday. They played and improvised through eight mostly Latin-American pieces by composers as diverse as Heitor Villa-Lobos, Silvio Sivuca, Zequinha de Abreu, Jimi Hendrix and Bill Evans. Ward-Bergeman wrote the arrangements for this unusual configuration, and took the lead most often. He used the electronic effects possible on the hyper-accordion sparingly, mostly working in some echoes tastefully, with none of the wide swoops Golijov favors.

Amplification in Harris made the first two pieces sound gummy, making Weilerstein's cello hard to discern through the dense textures except when she played very high on the fingerboard. But the slow tempo and clear textures of a Hendrix tune came through clearly, and that seemed to get things right for the rest of the set. The deft work of Haddad and Ogawa, mostly using brushes and busily interpolating other quiet sounds on tiny cymbals, triangle and "found" instruments, added an exotic aura.

The highlights for me were a colorful arrangement of Villa-Lobos' "O Trenzinho do Caipira," with a chugging accordion and fluctuating tempos depicting the little train perfectly, and a blood-pumping Argentinean chamamé tune, "Feira de Mangaio." As a Bill Evans fan, I also admired the complex harmonies of "Time Remembered." The encore, a charming arrangement of the popular tune "Tico Tico," sent everyone off smiling.

For the first half, Weilerstein demonstrated her ability to command tonal colors and technical accuracy at every point in Kodály's Sonata for Unaccompanied Cello, a formidable piece that she made seem like child's play. Add her to the list of impressive 20-somethings this year.

Not to miss this weekend: Leila Josefowicz plays Thomas Adés' violin concerto "Concentric Paths" Friday with the Aspen Chamber Symphony. The American String Quartet plays Haydn, Bartók and Schubert's glorious "Death and the Maiden" Saturday night in Harris Hall. The final concert Sunday finds Marin Alsop conducting Ravel's Daphnis et Chloé Suite No. 2, Mahler's Wunderhorn songs with Isabel Bayrakdarian and Stephen Powell, then finishing off the summer with Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring."

Harvey Steiman has been attending the Aspen Music Festival for 16 years. His reviews appear regularly in The Aspen Times.

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