

Theater reviews

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Guitarists Duo Noire get 'a little weird' at Ethical Society concert

By John Huxhold Special to the Post-Dispatch Jan 29, 2017



Students at Johnson Wabash Elementary in Ferguson with St. Louis Guitar Society artists-in-residence Thomas Flippin and Chris Mallett of Duo Noire. Handout photo

It's always a special pleasure to have Duo Noire back in town, and Saturday night at the Ethical Society was no exception. Classical guitarists Thomas Flippin and Christopher Mallett created a relaxed, informal atmosphere as they presented an eclectic program that included two world premières.

One of those premières was "Hocus Pocus" by Clarice Assad which, according to Flippin, "gets a little weird." Sure enough, in the first section, "Abracadabra," there were lots of clicks and thumps, strings bent violently sideways and a rhythmic pattern that sounded like a herd of horses at full gallop. In the second section, "Shamans," they used tablespoons to slide up and down or beat on the strings producing an eerie, sci-fi sound. The third section — "Klutzy Witches" — ended with a loud thump produced by four feet hitting the floor and both players slapping the bodies of their guitars.

The other première, "Soli Deo Gloria," by Courtney Bryan was much shorter and a lot less weird. Flippin described it as a kind of "prayer" which began softly, with soft single notes played alternately by each guitar and long pauses in between. Then the piece gathered itself for a brief, jazzy climax before returning to those initial softer notes, single tones fading into silence.

The program opened with "Four Brazilian Pieces" by Celso Machado, one of which was loosely translated as "grandfather's old jalopy" and you could just about picture it bouncing down the roadway. The program closed with "Milwaukee," a part of a larger piece called "From Some Towns and Cities." There didn't seem to be any beer drinking going on, but bluegrass influences popped up at every turn.

In between were pieces like Astor Piazzolla's "Libertango. Mallett introduced it by tracing the evolution of the tango from the rhythm of fighters to the dance hall to the concert hall and, finally to "couple's therapy." The performance was certainly suave enough to settle comfortably into any serious music venue. The same could be said of "Mallorca" by Isaac Albeniz. Flippin and Mallett made the most of its lovely melodies and gentle, seductive rhythms.

Composer Nathaniel Dett's ancestors were freed slaves who escaped to Canada to avoid persecution. "Juba" is his take on a dance performed in a time when slaves were not allowed to have drums, so they beat on their thighs and chests. Duo Noire did no thumping on their chests, but there was a lot of it on their guitars, as there was in Paulo Bellinati's "Jongo."

With its incredibly transparent and lightly textured delivery, spectacular precision, delightful commentary, and a wide range of guitar techniques, Duo Noire produced another engaging and profoundly enjoyable program. After all its applause, the audience was rewarded with an elegant version of "The St. Louis Blues" which, like Piazzolla's tango, was all dressed up for the concert hall.

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