

Ritz Chamber Players: Intensity, Poignancy and Sparkle in Birmingham Concert

By Michael Huebner

The Ritz Chamber Players was established in 2002 to spotlight the wealth of classical music composed by African Americans and performed by African Americans.

It fit that mold admirably Sunday at the Alys Stephens Center with music by Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson and Margaret Bonds, but with visceral performances of Schubert and Mendelssohn, the Jacksonville, Fla., organization proved it is much more than a niche ensemble.

Although Alison Buchanan's rich, thick-toned soprano nearly overwhelmed three gentle pastoral songs by English composer Roger Quilter, there was much to admire with her vocal control and range of emotions. Those qualities flourished in Bonds' "Three Dream Portraits," in which Buchanan drew out the poignancy of the Langston Hughes texts. She demanded that listeners take heed, singing "Night coming tenderly, black like me" in "Dream Variation," and "Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed" in "I Too, Sing America."

Violinist Ashley Horne's clear-toned rendition of Perkinson's "Blues Forms for Solo Violin" was technically brilliant, but felt too timid for the blues. Schubert's "The Shepherd on the Rock," a trio for soprano, clarinet and piano, was Buchanan's tour de force, as she



projected with fierce intensity and impeccable precision. Clarinetist Terrance Patterson played with a rich, lovely tone, but needed more assertiveness.

Pianist Kevin Sharpe's subdued accompaniment in the vocal works exploded in Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor. In a sparkling display, he led the charge by designing sprawling lines and imparting the composer's mystery and lightness. Cellist Caleb Jones' dark hues and violinist Horne's fleet technique contributed to the full-bodied texture.

Before intermission, Buchanan honored the memory of Birmingham arts leader Ted Tibbs with a moving performance of Puccini's "Vissi d'arte." The quintet's encore was a stirring arrangement of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

Ritz Chamber Players

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Alison Buchanan, soprano
Ashley Horne, violinist
Caleb Jones, cellist
Kevin Sharpe, pianist
Terrance Patterson, clarinetist

Alys Stephens Center
Sunday
Presented by Birmingham Chamber Music Society