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Innovative Guitar Quartet gives lesson in excellence

By Samuel Black

The final concert of the 106th season of Matinee Musicale was a stunning tour de force by the Minneapolis Guitar Quartet.

Four men played their guitars to an eager crowd at the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Duluth. They shared music by nine composers from seven countries, and they used at least as many playing styles.

Two sets of Spanish pieces offered traditional guitar playing. "The Dance of Luis Alonso" by Jeronimo Gimenez had Andalusian themes. The "Argentine Dances" by Alberto Ginastera, on the other hand, was filled with tango rhythms and sounds of the vast plains of the south. The middle piece, "Dance of a Young Girl," was a lyrical ballad with a very nostalgic and haunting melody.

The quartet is composed of Joseph Hagedorn, O/ Nicholas raths, Jeffrey Lambert and Jeffrey Thygeson. All four played six-string traditional guitars, tuned to match. However, watching them play offered a different picture. Frequently, the melody wandered from one guitar to the next, as if one singer picked up the verse in the middle and completed it. This sharing was flawless all evening.. In the "Toccata in D" by J.S. Bach, the rapid parts flowed around the circle, while all four played chordal sections together.

In two pieces written by Lambert, this technique was more pronounced. The three lower guitars played a rippling pattern, just like a room full of hand bells instead of guitar strings. As they passed this pattern back and forth, the fourth guitar played a wistful melody. "Minnesota Winter" was followed by "Chicago Summer," a sultry, moody piece with droning sounds underneath a gentle tune.

Hagedorn took some accordion pieces by Maria Kalaniemi and made them shimmer. "Stars in Heaven" was as dreamy as its title, but ""Getting Dark Polka" increased the pace, allowing "Herman's Reel" to rip through the room with abandon. The floorboards shook with the rhythm.

A set of two commissioned pieces by Haitian-American composer Daniel Bernard Roumain was particularly hypnotizing. "Harlem" was thick with layers of sounds as each guitar strummed and created oceans of sound. The second piece, "Haiti," was subtitled "Imagine the Sun, the Beach, and Poverty Everywhere." Constant parallel patterns by two guitars created a dark and moody sensation, and the piece left off with a sense of hanging in midair.

With a blaze of energy, the group ended the program with "Voices from the Garden," a commissioned piece by Massachusetts composer David Kechley. Five slightly varying images of a Japanese temple garden rippled over the stage. From a "Lament" to an "awakening" followed by Driving," these pieces were virtuosic for all four players. They each thumped on different parts of their guitars, and played rapid, overlapping parts, coming to a rousing percussively strummed conclusion. A quick encore featuring popular tunes of the '60s lightened the send-off. This was innovative music at its very best.