

MUSIC ACCORD

STEFON HARRIS

The Anatomy of a Box (2009-10)

Reviews

Imani quintet stepping outside chamber music's comfort zones

Imani Winds is taking a giant leap outside the box with "The Anatomy of a Box: a sonic painting in wood, metal and wind."

The 25-minute piece by Stefon Harris, co-commissioned by Imani and Hancher Auditorium, will have its world premiere Friday at City High School in Iowa City. The concert begins at 7:30 p.m.

Improvisation provides the challenge for the five-piece woodwind quintet, formed in 1997 in New York City.

"None of us learned to improvise in school; any way we've been exposed to it has been outside of school," says Toyin Spellman-Diaz, 36, of Queens, the quintet's oboe player. She also teaches in the pre-college division of the Manhattan School of Music, where the group's members met as college students.

"(Flute player Valerie Coleman) had the idea of putting together a wind quintet of musicians of color," Spellman-Diaz says. "She wanted us to go as far as the world would take us. ... I thought we were just getting together to read some music!"

The other voices in the group are Mariam Adam, clarinet; Jeff Scott, French horn; and Monica Ellis, bassoon.

The ensemble has multiple missions, Spellman-Diaz says.

"The main thing is to expand the repertoire of the wind quintet. The wind quintet is a standard chamber music formation, but it's rapidly evolving in the 21st century, and we wanted to have some sort of stamp of where the wind quintet is going. We want to change the sound and change the way people perform together, to have that radiate to all the different forms of chamber groups," she says.

"The way we perform is very much more on the interactive side. We think that just sitting in your chair and staring at your music is not the way to convey what the composer had in mind with the way he or she wrote the music."

Harris' piece, however, takes the group outside its comfort zone.

"We've been working with all these people who have been encouraging us to do some improv, but Stefon was the first to teach us," Spellman-Diaz says. "He wrote into the music how we should improvise in rehearsal. He has a whole method for teaching us. ... He's laid out a structure that's easy theatrically for us to improvise over."

"Taking that first step — taking that leap — is really exciting, and I gotta admit, a little scary. But it's really rewarding. The product is going to be exciting for the audience to listen to."

Harris, 36, a composer, jazz musician and vibraphone player from Sayreville, N.J., met with the players long before sitting down to write the piece.

"We talked for a very long time about where they're going as an ensemble, where they came from, their mission," he says. "The task for me was to figure out how to break down and explain the anatomy of improvisation," he says.

"For me, creating music is not about creativity, it's the process of discovery," he says. His inspiration came from the log drums in his music room.

"They're little boxes with music in them," he says. "I would write down the notes coming from the box, created a pattern, then went to the piano and mapped out every harmonic possibility that would fit on top of this box. I created a harmonic palette to draw from and play in different keys."

"With music there's always something that holds it together," Harris says. "With Beethoven's Fifth, there a motif at the beginning that holds the piece together. I reversed the process, taking the thing often hidden — the DNA — and highlighted that."

He'll join the Imani Winds in Friday's concert on vibraphone and marimba, and won't be standing still. That's one of the reasons he likes his mallet instruments.

"I can dance a lot, move a lot. Movement is a critical part of translating my emotion into sound," he says.

— Diana Nollen, Cedar Rapids Gazette

World premiere concert takes Iowa City stage

As composer and vibraphonist Stefon Harris was sitting at his piano, trying to compose, he became frustrated. He looked up and spotted his log drum - a small box with several slits notched along the top. When hit, the slits elicit a variety of pitches. The sound of that log drum became an inspiration.

"I'm looking at this box, and I'm trying to discover what this box is made of," Harris said. "It's like what holds the music in this box together. And I discovered that all music has something that holds it together. There is usually some pitch or some melody in the center that makes a chord progression or a piece of music feel united. So this piece of music is about that. It's about pouring red dye on the DNA of a piece of music, of a melody. It explores that type of concept."

The piece of music he described is *Anatomy of a Box: A Sonic Painting in Wood, Metal, and Wind*. Harris, with Imani Winds - a quintet from New York City - will perform the world premiere at 7:30 p.m. Friday in City High's Opstad Auditorium, 1900 Morningside Drive. Tickets are \$10 to \$28.

Imani Winds consists of flutist Valerie Coleman, oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, clarinetist Mariam Adam, bassoonist Monica Ellis, and French horn player Jeff Scott.

The group, which formed in 1997, was Coleman's idea. She wanted to create a chamber-music wind quintet with musicians from ethnic minorities. Since then, the group has performed around the world with two resident composers, Coleman and Scott, while collaborating and working on various projects that expand the idea of what such a quintet can play.

Harris' new piece, co-commissioned by Hancher, is part of Imani Winds' Legacy Commissioning project, which the group established to celebrate its 10-year anniversary. The project aims to commission and perform 10 new works by 10 composers from various backgrounds. Thus far, the composers have been Alvan Singleton, Roberto Sierra, and Jason Moran.

"It was an opportunity to just go on a journey with these musicians," Ellis said. "I think some of them would not have gravitated toward writing for these wind instruments, but once we approached them, it was something that they were really excited about."

"It's very interesting when you come up with a project like this. You never really know how it is going to work. It's just been fantastic. I think it's a classic case of 'If you build it, they will come.' All you have to do is ask and put the project out there."

Harris' piece is the fourth premiere for the quintet. Ellis said the musicians were extremely excited about the debut and described Harris' creation as a work filled with worldly sounds that take the audience on many journeys.

He combined the wind instruments and his own instruments, the vibraphone and marimba, with other tracks of music to create a multimedia piece. He also introduced improvisation to the classical quintet, a new concept for the group and one that the members discussed a couple of years ago when first collaborating with Harris.

"In terms of improvisation, what an unbelievable opportunity I have to take a teaching concept that I have called melodic progression and have musicians of the caliber of Imani Winds put it into practice," Harris said. "It is an unbelievable opportunity for me. They are so incredible. It's a real testament to whether my system will work or not. It's working beautifully so far. It's really just giving them some core tools."

The quintet members were a bit intimidated at first by the idea of improvisation, he said, but after time and what he described as "letting it build," they understood the concept. Not only is improvisation concerned with construction, he said, the piece itself embraces that key concept - breaking the music down and rebuilding. With improvisation, he said, every performance should be fresh and exciting.

And so - before composing, before rehearsing, before improvising - the piece started with a box, an instrument that holds music together. And it ends with a composition held together by its performers.

Sarah Larson The Daily Iowan - Sep 24 2009

The Anatomy of a Box

Composer: Stefon Harris

Instrumentation: fl, ob, cl, hn, bsn, vib

Premiering Artists: Stefon Harris, vibraphone;
Imani Winds

Duration: 15-20'

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<http://stefonharris.com/>

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Imani Winds official site

<http://www.imaniwinds.com/>



Stefon Harris



Imani Winds. Credit: Matthew Murphy

World premiere of Stefon Harris' piece for Imani Winds

At first glance, the pairing of jazz vibraphonist Stefon Harris and woodwind quintet Imani Winds might seem a little odd.

After all, what can a jazz great know about classical music and vice versa?

Apparently, a lot.

Though Harris has made jazz his niche and the quintet has made its world music, neither wants to be labeled one or the other.

"We are an example of the iPod generation," Harris said in a phone interview. "We don't really see music as having such strict boundaries."

Hancher co-commissioned Harris' new work, "The Anatomy of a Box: A Sonic Painting in wood, metal and wind" for the Imani Winds. The world premiere of the new piece takes place at 7:30 p.m. Friday at City High. Harris will join the Imani Winds on stage.

"We are thrilled to present the world premiere of a piece by Stefon Harris for Imani Winds," said Jacob Yarrow, Hancher's programming director.

"They're both at the forefront of their fields, have fascinating approaches to making music."

Harris met with the quintet numerous times to discuss the new piece.

"What I didn't want to do is say, 'I will write a piece for you and see you in concert,'" Harris said. "They had a strong emphasis in improvisation. We had sessions talking about improvisation."

"I think of it as a process of discovery. They were learning about improvisation. I had some techniques to use."

Moments of group and individual improvisation can be found in the 25-minute piece. To Harris, the improvisation helps to "blur the lines between improvisation and composition and, in turn, between classical and jazz."

Jeff Scott, French horn player for Imani Winds, said he is pleased with the piece.

"(Stefon) really understands the osmosis from classical to jazz and to world music," Scott said.

"The Anatomy of a Box" is part of Imani Winds' Legacy Commission Project, which commemorates the quintet's 10th anniversary with 10 compositions by established and emerging composers of color.

The quintet plans to start recording the compositions for an album in December.

Scott refers to the rest of the concert as a "potpourri of styles."

"Everybody will find something, and hopefully multiple things from the concert that they will enjoy," he said.

— Deanna Howard, Iowa City Press-Citizen

A masterful blend of classic and jazz

It's a good thing when you leave a performance wanting to hear it all over again. Friday night, many likely left the Imani Winds' concert with Stefon Harris needing to hear it again.

The concert at City High's Opstad Auditorium in Iowa City opened with three pieces by the wind quintet. The New York-based group selected a program that fit well with the piece it played later with jazz star Harris. It began with a composition by its flautist, Valerie Coleman, titled "Red Clay Mississippi Delta." This world premiere piece hewed to the expectations of a classical music crowd while spicing things up with the low moan of the blues and the sprightly swing of jazz.

"I had in mind the juke joints, casinos, the blues sounds I grew up with courtesy of my Mom," Coleman said last week in advance of the show. "Don't be fooled, though. The piece is classical music."

The piece delivered on that promise. The performance of oboe player Toyin Spellman-Diaz was particularly notable, her supple lines bridging the gap between classical and jazz to give the song its most swinging tones.

The second composition was by French horn player Jeff Scott. "Homage to Duke" is a tribute to the later-period sacred music of Duke Ellington. Introducing the piece, Spellman-Diaz said Scott originally sought to write an arrangement for Ellington's "Come Sunday." He so reinterpreted the piece, however, that it became an original composition.

It was a quieter, more solemn piece, though the performers showed flashes of fire as they channeled the ecstasy of both Ellington and Scott's compositions with a swinging tempo.

The third piece in the first part of the show was "Quintette," a multi-section piece by Jean Francaix. This was more fitting with traditional notions of chamber music; you would be hard pressed to find a beat to tap your foot along to, but that by no means suggests this was any less satisfying than the two pieces that preceded it. Coleman's flute and Mariam Adam's clarinet hit playful high notes, while Monica Ellis' bassoon seemed to play in every register, most notably holding down the bottom end with rumbling notes.

As good as the quintet was on its own, the real draw was its collaboration with Harris. The quintet is in the midst of what it calls the Legacy Commissioning Project, a five-year effort to celebrate its 10th anniversary with commissioned works from 10 composers of diverse backgrounds. Friday's concert with Harris marked the debut of his commissioned piece, "The Anatomy of a Box: a sonic painting in wood, metal and wind."

The vibraphonist, who has performed often in the Corridor in the past few years, said he was inspired to create the piece by a log drum, a wooden box with slits cut in it to create different tones depending on where it is struck. After playing it for a while, he hit upon the idea for his piece (co-commissioned by Hancher Auditorium).

He sought to create chaos, which represented what goes on in the box, through the somewhat discordant but never uncontrolled playing of the quintet. After that opening, he wanted to explode the box, in a manner of speaking, to reveal its inner workings. This was represented in the piece by longer, more contemplative sections that highlighted each of the instruments. That was followed by a closing section that returned to the chaotic cacophony of the opening.

It was a challenging composition that clearly allowed the woodwind players to stretch beyond their comfort zones, introducing improvisation to a group less familiar with its deployment. Before the show, Coleman said the group's work with jazz composers has made its members "think about it. They've made us hungry for it. As a group, we have talked about it all the time. One by one, we each came aboard with the desire to improvise."

That was obvious Friday as smiles broke out on Coleman's and Adam's faces as Scott gave a solo worthy of a tight jazz combo toward the conclusion of the piece.

Through all of this, Harris was a dervish, bouncing from the vibraphone to the marimba and back, the mallets in his hands a blur as he showered a cascade of notes on the audience.

Good as the piece was, it makes one long for a recorded version. Short of following Imani Winds and Harris on the road over the next few days as they bring the piece to other cities, that will offer the only way to fully absorb and understand this complex piece. It was superficially rewarding on Friday, but it was clear there is enough lurking in its depths to satisfy for some time.

— John Kenyon, Corridor Buzz

About Music Accord

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