A selection of Oberlin Conservatory concert reviews by Sophia Colby

CLASSICAL GUITARIST STEPHEN ARON

From driving, dance-like rhythms to graceful, moody melodies—Venezuelan music, Chopin, and jazz have a surprising amount in common, as classical guitarist Stephen Aron demonstrated on Thursday, September 15, at his engaging though not flawless seventy minute recital at Kulas Hall in Oberlin Conservatory.

Aron's musical taste was the most fascinating part of the concert. Transitions between disparate styles from American blues to Polish folk to Iberian classical were seamless. Moderate, moody waltzes from a variety genres and regions provided a throughline and seemed to be where Aron felt most secure as a performer.

Unfortunately, however, Aron seemed to be lacking confidence the evening of his recital, perhaps feeling the pressure of giving one of the first faculty recitals at Oberlin Conservatory in the new academic year. He frequently had lapses of memory, but he tended to recover quickly such that the full audience in the intimate recital hall scarcely noticed. Indeed, Aron remained so composed that one might have questioned whether his memory slips were simply a stylistic choice had there not been so many, including a particularly noticeable one during his final piece of the evening, "Rockport Stomp."

"Rockport Stomp" and another piece in the program, "Suite Blue," are both Aron's own compositions, and were recital stand-outs despite imprecise execution. Laid back yet complex, funky jazz pieces with soaring "solos," they sound wholly unlike classical guitar compositions, and yet are celebrations of the instrument in all its airy versatility.

Apparently interested in pushing the guitar to its limits, Aron also transcribed six of Chopin's mazurkas to play for the evening. Six mazurkas is a lot of mazurkas—beautiful though they may be, the audience was tiring of the similarity between the pieces by about the third or fourth. Aron's arranging shined the best on Op. 59 No. 2, where he used strums to further emphasize Chopin's melody. The other mazurka arrangements would be improved by taking similar advantage of the guitar's unique features instead of aiming for absolute faithfulness to the original piano, as every extra strum and harmonic adds a great deal to pieces that can no longer rely on a complex bass part. But then again, how much liberty can one comfortably take with Chopin?

Aron's renditions of English lutenist John Dowland's "The Shoemaker's Wife," "Go From My Window," and "A Fancy," as well as Spanish composer Federico Moreno Torroba's "Sonatina in A," shined best in their slower and moodier parts, consistent with the rest of the recital. "Sonatina in A" also showcased Aron's dynamic expression as he flew from the mellow lullabye of the second movement to a sudden burst of exuberant vigor in the last.

In addition to his own jazz compositions, Aron's treatment of Venezuelan composer Antonio Lauro's pieces "Angostura," "Carora," "Maria Luísa," and "El Marabino" was another high point in the recital. This concert coincided with the first day of Hispanic Heritage Month. It was especially salient to unexpectedly hear a familiar *musica llanera* sound—with its driving yet sweet rhythms and delicate embellishments—on the occasion given its obscurity in the United States.

FOLK ARTIST RHIANNON GIDDENS

"Some people dream they're naked in front of their fifth grade class," remarked Grammy-winning folk artist Rhiannon Giddens. "*I* dream we'll come back from intermission and no one will be there." Giddens had nothing to worry about, as a packed Finney Chapel hung on her every word and note throughout a nearly three hour long concert the afternoon of Tuesday, October 4.

Giddens and collaborator Francesco Turrisi are fearless musical historians apparently capable of playing any instrument in any style. Throughout the concert, they shifted between cultural influences including Italian opera, Appalachian bluegrass and its Irish roots, Black spirituals and blues, and smooth Latin jazz. Giddens sang as well as played several instruments: a special banjo with its roots specifically in Black and Caribbean culture, a viola cross-tuned and played as a fiddle, and even a kazoo. Turrisi played frame drum, the cello banjo, accordion, and jazz piano. He and Giddens were also joined at times by Jason Sypher on the double bass. Each style found unity through rhythmic, moody arrangements and Giddens' quest to bring awareness to marginalized people's stories through their music.

Giddens and Turrisi used their already eclectic array of instruments to consistently surprising, exciting effect. Both banjos had a softer timbre than the conventional banjo, reminiscent of low mandolins. Other folk musicians would do well to experiment with tuning and playing the viola as a fiddle, as the lower pitches ensure fiddling can be dense and enthusiastic without becoming overpowering. Turrisi used the accordion often as a means to add textural droning chords, again creating mellow ambience on an

instrument that is easy to overdo. All these alto, tenor, and bass instruments coupled with the haunting and slightly mournful lower range of Giddens' voice created a visceral experience as low vibrations traveled through the wooden pews of the chapel. The arrangements and compositions were always agreeable but never excessively obvious, and they kept many in the audience nodding their heads to the beat throughout.

In particular, "At the Purchaser's Option," Giddens' take on what an enslaved Black woman may have felt when being sold, made incredible use of a meter with seven beats per measure. The recorded album version of the song is in the standard four, still very good—but the performed version was marvelous. As Giddens sang "take my body, you can take my bones, take my blood, but not my soul" to Turrisi's dazzlingly spirited piano accompaniment, the enslaved woman's determination to say her piece in an off-kilter world that gave her no time to breathe was all the more moving. Turrisi's contributions in general gave Giddens' repertoire even more energy and complexity than it has in her albums.

The tone of the afternoon was generally moody and serious—after Giddens took her first steps on stage, she belted out a ballad involving "death in the morning." This made "Underneath Our Harlem Moon" especially memorable as a jazzy number originally written in a minstrelsy-like context to ridicule the decadence of Black Harlem but later reclaimed by Black singers to celebrate it. The song provided a new angle on the concert's theme of justice through music. Also lovely was a rendition of a suite of instrumental pieces Giddens wrote for Nashville Ballet's *Black Lucy and the Bard*, which was cinematic and just odd enough to be compelling.

Giddens' unpretentious style of musical activism especially shined during her rendition of "I Shall Not Be Moved," where she gently taught the audience the melody of the old spiritual and then prompted them to join in a few verses: "On my way to justice / I shall not be moved / Like a tree planted by the water / I shall not be moved." As their voices tentatively joined Giddens', the generous cross-section of Oberlin community members, students, and all else who found themselves in Finney Chapel on that Tuesday afternoon found themselves united in the promise of the music.

OBERLIN JAZZ ENSEMBLE

"Is everyone having a good time?" called Chris Anderson, director of the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble, during a concert the evening of Saturday, November 5 in Finney Chapel. He need not have asked, as it was clear from tapping feet, smiling faces, and periodic shouts of amazement that both the audience and the ensemble itself was hooked on the

energetic, rhythmic tunes. Ensemble members beamed as they came to center stage to play their solos. One audience member quietly gasped, “these are *students*.”

The show was a time capsule to the swinging big band music popular in the 40s, its ten jazz tunes equal parts mellow, strolling nostalgia (Benny Golson’s “Whisper Not,” Sammy Nestico’s “It’s Oh, So Nice”) and upbeat dance tunes (Thad Jones’ “Back Bone,” Golson’s “Stablemates,” Jones’ “Big Dipper,” and Count Basie’s “Easin’ It.”)

In sizzly, flowing renditions, each of the twenty-four musicians seamlessly switched between taking the spotlight for solos and supporting their peers. The musicians’ esprit de corps—their ability to step back—must be applauded as much as their ability to step forward.

Some instrumental solos which particularly stood out include Nat Lewis on baritone saxophone, Kurton Harrison III on trumpet, and Anton Shelton on trombone. The unusual size, shape, and timbre of the baritone sax is in itself attention grabbing, made all the more captivating with Lewis’ inventive and confident soloing. Harrison played trumpet with a graceful and not overbearing lilt. And Shelton was utterly, infectiously happy playing trombone as his quick, intricate movements fascinated.

The ensemble’s two vocalists, Gabi Allemana and Sehrea Brown, also impressed. In “Sufferin’ With the Blues” by Cherokee Conyers and Lloyd Pemberton, Allemana—whose voice has an airy, light tone—strained to be heard over the band, but her stage presence and engagement with the audience nonetheless held their respect. The gentleness of Allemana’s voice was better suited to the soft, wistful ballad “Here’s To Life” by Artie Butler.

In Harold Arlen’s “Come Rain or Shine” and Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose,” Sehrea Brown showcased her formidably large vocal range, confident tone, and playful, creative improvisation. Her runs, leaps, and sense of rhythm on the off-kilter “Honeysuckle Rose” were an effortless joy to listen to. She is certain to have a fruitful career as a vocalist after Oberlin if she pursues it.

The trumpet section was capable of being louder than everyone else combined. They generally managed this with mutes and with softer playing, but there were still a few moments that got lost in the trumpets—Allemana’s singing, a bass solo, a sax solo or two. In particular, the guitar was at times entirely inaudible. This may be due to microphone and amplification choices. But this was a small detail in an otherwise excellent performance.