

Musical Landscape

Ulysses Quartet returns to PS21 House Blend Concert series with two concerts

By SHARON SMULLEN
Eagle correspondent

CHATHAM, N.Y. — When birds sing in the trees or rain drips from leaves, it's all part of the listening experience at PS21's open-sided performance pavilion amid fields and orchards in upstate N.Y.

Its House Blend Concerts are expansive, creative programs curated for the musicians, venue, and audience of locals and urbanites alike.

In this summer's second House Blend concert on Aug. 5, New York City-based Ulysses Quartet — violinists Christina Bouey and Rhiannon Banerdt, violist Colin Brookes, cellist Grace Ho — return to PS21 following last year's debut.

An intimate (audience sitting onstage) Pay-As-You-Wish afternoon recital of string quartets by Beethoven and contemporary composer Zosha Di Castri is followed by an eclectic ticketed evening program featuring Sun Li on pipa Chinese lute and harpist Nuiko Wadden.

"Beethoven's String Quartet No. 9 is a masterpiece," said Ulysses Quartet founder Bouey in a phone interview from New York, "it's joyous, beautiful, tragic, virtuosic and incredibly rewarding."

Fellow Canadian Di Castri's string quartet is the first she wrote, Bouey added.

The evening program is "a musical feast," with string ensemble, harp and pipa in various configurations.

Telemann's 18th-century 'Gulliver's Travels'-inspired "Suite for Two Violins" is "really lighthearted, [with] a lot of jokes."

For Rhiannon Giddens' "At the Purchaser's Option" commission

for Kronos Quartet's "50 for the Future" project of publicly available new works, she adapted her song about an 1830s sale notice for a young female slave. It has a melodic beauty to it, Bouey said.

"Sequenza II" (1993) for solo harp is one of 14 Sequenzas Luciano Berio wrote for different instruments or voice.

"Trio for harp, violin and cello" (1901) is by acclaimed harpist, composer and piano prodigy Henriette Renié.

Sun Li performs the classic pipa solo "Dance of the Yi People" by Wang Huiran (1960), then joins Ulysses for Tan Dun's "Concerto for String

Quartet and Pipa" (1999). "It's the traditional Chinese sound world, with Tan Dun's extra spice," Bouey said, "it's like fireworks going off."

Bouey founded award-winning Ulysses Quartet with former student friends in 2015. "We don't specialize in one era, [we] lift voices of every composer, giving new fresh energy to everything," she said.

Their story-based YouTube music videos help attract younger adults to classical music, which is "a really rewarding way to bring people into our world."

The quartet performs throughout the Americas, overseas from Andorra to Istanbul, and across the Far East in Japan, China, Vietnam and Ho's homeland, Taiwan.

Homer's "Odyssey" inspired their name. "We're on our own musical journey," Bouey said, "four musicians that love what they're doing and can't picture their life any other way."

With bold, stylistically diverse selections old and new, House Blend is curated by PS21 Director

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY LAUREN DESBERG

New York City-based Ulysses Quartet returns to PS21's House Blend concert on Aug. 5.

of Community Initiatives Matt Gold, also a percussionist and Williams College Artist in Residence.

The programs on Aug. 5 explore the history string instruments carry, with different approaches to string writing and performance technique, Gold said.

Giddens' work, for example, is based on a song she wrote on the banjo, an essential American string instrument with an African history, he added.

"We're looking at the ways string instruments travel, the history, cultures and music they carry

with them, and [how] music can be regenerated and reinterpreted."

Columbia University professor Zosha Di Castri is an influential contemporary composer of "wildly imaginative and innovative work," he said.

Pairing her with Beethoven gives a sense of how composers find new, exciting ways to breathe life into the string quartet, so central to western classical music, he added.

Musical matchmaker Gold introduced the pipa and harp players to Ulysses Quartet.

If You Go

House Blend Concert II

What: Ulysses Quartet

Where: PS21: Performance Spaces for the 21st Century, 2980 NY-66, Chatham, N.Y.

When: 1 p.m. Aug. 5

Tickets: Pay-what-you-wish

Information and reservations: 518-392-6121, ps21chatham.org

What: Ulysses Quartet with special guests Sun Li and Nuiko Wadden

Where: PS21: Performance Spaces for the 21st Century, 2980 NY-66, Chatham, N.Y.

When: 7 p.m., Aug. 5

Tickets: \$10-\$35

Information and reservations: 518-392-6121, ps21chatham.org

"We engage musicians who are deep artists with a unique perspective on what they do," he said. "The harp is found in so many different cultures and western concert music; and the Chinese pipa has a long history and incredible repertoire."

PS21 generates new work covering a wide range of history and periods, Gold said. "Bringing musicians together for even a few days to develop a new program [lets] audiences hear something unique to this place."

Ambient sounds are an intrinsic part of the experience, he added.

"The western concert hall is a temple set away from the world, sealed off from outside. [PS21] is embedded in the natural environment."

"When there's a breeze, particularly in the evening of a hot day, it's kind of an oasis."