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Scandinavia in South Florida

BY: STEVE GLADSTONE ON MAY 15, 2013.

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Rafael Ramirez, Tony Seepersad, Michael Andrews, Luis Fernandez

Conventional wisdom has it that you are never an expert in your own home town. While this may be true in my case, it certainly isn't in the case of the four plucky musicians who make up the South Beach Chamber Ensemble (SBCE). Luis Fernandez (violin), Tony Seepersad (violin), Rafael Ramirez (viola), and Michael Andrews (cello), are the members of this power-house quartet based in Miami Beach.

Cellist Andrews, SBCE's 1997 Founder and Executive Director, leads these stout musicians whose collective experiences

include studies and performances throughout Europe and the Americas.

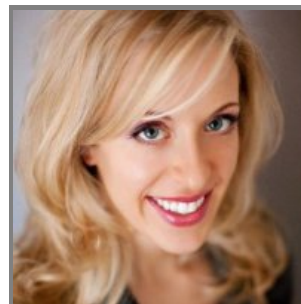
Last Sunday (Mother's Day) Miami Beach Botanical Garden was the venue for SBCE's program, "Scandinavia Explored." A wall of long sliding glass doors served as windows to the purples, reds, whites and greens of the gardens and was the backdrop for the players as they rendered their program of Nordic string quartets and songs.

The muscular 1976 three movement String Quartet No. 3 by Joonas Kokkonen, prominent Finnish composer of symphonies, chamber music and opera (The Last Temptations), was first up in the afternoon program. The SBCE brought the opening dissonant harmonics of the first movement to a dark stroll, the effort textured with strident violins, plucked strings swelling into a swarm of conflicted voices before whimpering out. The lower voices set a driving pace at the top of the second movement, the dissonance continuing as the spirited players navigated the furious passages, building into an ascending release that ended abruptly. Kokkonen ends his quartet uncharacteristically with a slow movement, the final adagio featuring a solo violin and solo viola, vibrant and expressive. The foursome reached for a melodic resolution as the piece concluded in a sustained fade.

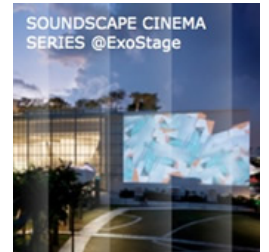
Next up were six Scandinavian Songs for voice and piano, retooled by violinist Luis Fernandez for soprano and string quartet. According to the program notes, the art songs of Scandinavia emphasize "a love of nature, ... feelings of longing and melancholy, the contrast between light and dark, ... and lively folk traditions."

Soprano Anna Hersey was the real deal – her long blond hair against a classic navy-blue dress, a Scandinavian mother, and a book of Scandinavian Song forthcoming from her, was the required cachet to render these short and lovely tunes with convincing authenticity. Oh yeah, one huge flawless voice helped.

"Jeg elsker Dig!," with text by Hans Christian Andersen and music by Edvard Grieg, was the first tune, Hersey and the quartet blending beautifully on this love song, the hall acoustics amplifying all 5 voices naturally to satisfying effect. The next piece, "Aspåkær-polska" by Swedish composer Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, was a playful work, lively and pleasant for both singer and quartet, Hersey easily propelling her high notes into the room. The mildly dramatic "Som en våg" by Gunnar de Frumerie, weaving love with the depth of the sea, was well drawn, while Gösta Nystroem, also musing on the sea in "Det enda," provided Hersey with a vehicle for her considerable pipes, its dissonant beginning segueing into a rich melody with a lower string ostinato. The lullaby-like "Saa tag mit Hjerte" by Hugo Alfvén was hypnotic in effect, the lush repetitious motif engaging the soprano with the melodic equivalent of the



Anna Hersey



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giving of one's heart. The final song, Ture Rangström's "Pan," fit the environs well, its message ("All of nature coming alive at the sound of music.") brought out Hersey's delightful facial expressions one more time, her voice towering, delicate and graceful.

The second half of SBCE's program featured Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's String Quartet in G minor, Op. 27. This was Grieg's only complete string quartet out of three, the first one was lost and the third one remained incomplete at the time of his death. He wrote this piece during a difficult time in his personal life and wanted the work to be immense. In Grieg's own words, his string quartet "... strives towards breadth, soaring flight and above all resonance for the instruments for which it is written."

Soar it does. The opening tutti (all voices together) of the first movement quickly broke into a sprint; the soring melodic theme took flight, soon concluded, and took off on another trajectory. Fernandez, Seepersad, Ramirez and Andrews were fearless, inspired and passionate throughout this well textured and layered movement. All the voices plunging and heaving through descending passages, sudden stops and converging melodies, ultimately returned to the melodic sprint. Grieg covered so much musical turf in the first, that the listener is left wondering what he could possibly offer up in the next three movements.

Grieg does offer up. At the top of the second, the cello seizes upon a pleasant romantic melody, a lilting respite from the first movement, passing it to the violins which reshaped it into a crisp upbeat variation. This charming tune kept weaving in and out, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing, finally sweetly evaporating off the strings of the violin.

The third movement returns to the enormity of the first, a sturdy tutti opening giving rise to passages pivoting in many directions. Towards the center, all four voices took turns with a light and airy melody, twisting and rotating with a sudden scamper to the end.

Grieg proves to be an equal opportunity composer, giving all four voices their due. His quartet, orchestral in scope, kept driving to its conclusion in the final movement, the players continuing to test the capabilities of their instruments. The violins, just out in front of the viola and cello, launched into a tarantella, the foursome playing with one bow, their communication impeccable. The charge continued energetically through the thematic coda as the audience erupted in applause, the players bowing and smiling after their workout.

If the SBCE is not on your radar screen, you would be served well by adjusting your beam. SBCE serves up affordable high quality chamber music for multi-generational audiences.

The "Scandinavia Explored" program will be repeated this Thursday and Friday, May 16 and 17, in south Dade. For locations and times, punch up <http://www.sobe chamberensemble.org/> onto your radar screen.

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