

Several Curtain Calls for Felici Trio

By Nancy O'Connell

Three talented musicians appeared on stage at the Bankhead Theater on Saturday evening, November 15th in a superb concert of piano trio music. Each individual player was a consummate artist, and as in all good chamber music, they obviously listened carefully to one another and matched their tone qualities and intonation to one another.

Two of them are from Europe - Rebecca Hang, the violinist, is German born. Steven Vanhauwaert, the pianist, hails from Belgium. Brian Schuldt, the cellist, is from Seattle and studied with the famous Janos Starker at Indiana University. All three have won many prizes in music, individually and as a trio. Eleven years ago, Rebecca and the cellist, Brian Schuldt, married, and they have concertized extensively with the trio ever since.

They opened their program with Beethoven's Adagio, Variations and Rondo in G Major, Opus 121a, the "Kakadu Variations." It began with a slow, thoughtful *Adagio* with good contrasts between the forte and piano passages. The 'cellist and violinist had long sustained passages and a question and answer sequence. The 'cellist kept glancing at the violinist and matched his tones and bowing to hers. Steven, the pianist, had a delicate touch and never overwhelmed the strings. Some of the variations were humorous. The entire work was loosely based on a folk song by Wenzel Mueller.

Rebecca wore a stunning red gown which swept to the floor. The two men were a contrast in dark suits with black shirts and no ties. The pianist played sensitively and in one variation the two string players used a spiccato technique which emphasized the playfulness of this variation filled with humor. The Rondo

had some lightning quick passages that all three performers tossed off effortlessly. As all three raced through the *gigue* (a jig) and neared the dynamic last chords, it was obvious that they have total command of their instruments.

Maurice Ravel's Piano Trio followed. In his introduction to the work, the 'cellist said, "This is more like a force of nature than a trio." In the *Modere* there were demanding parts for all three musicians. Beautiful melodies were almost haunting in their quality. Arpeggios and running notes on the piano were played with great clarity of tone. The pianist never overshadowed the string players, so that all three voices were heard clearly. Fiery scale passages contrasted soon with the 'cellist up in the difficult thumb position on his A string and the violinist up in the stratosphere on her instrument. Quiet harmonics which began for the 'cellist on his lowest C string are seldom heard in a concert. Later, the strings switched rapidly back and forth between *pizzicato* (plucking the strings) and *spiccato* passages which placed great technical demands upon them.

Tres Largo commenced in the piano with a portion sounding in the lowest register. To this reviewer it was similar in effect to Debussy's beginning of his *Cathedrale Engloutie* with a dreamlike quality. Ravel and Debussy were contemporaries and together they founded musical Impressionism in the early years of the 20th century. The low pitched beginning was followed by a tempestuous storm like passage filled with suppressed excitement. A beautiful 'cello solo altered the mood, and the movement ended, as it had begun, in the lowest notes of the piano.

In the *Anime* movement rich

and glorious notes poured forth from all three players. The pianist had glissandos encompassing his entire keyboard. Trills and the rapid crossing of all 4 strings created an orchestral effect which led to an exciting and dramatic climax.

Franz Schubert's Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, Opus 99 was composed near the end of his life and was first performed in 1828, the year of his death. The pianist told me afterwards that he had never seen this music until three weeks ago, so it is incredible in that short space of time he mastered it so completely. He made the most difficult passages look effortless. I performed this trio while in high school as the pianist in the Peninsula Trio, and we took a good two months to conquer it! In this performance there was superb ensemble work. The triplet passages were clean and his pedaling never blurred the notes together. The 'cellist again had many high notes in the thumb position and Brian Schuldt played them all with perfect intonation.

In the *Andante* movement, which is contemplative, the 'cellist began with a lyrical solo and he was soon joined by the violinist. Schubert was famous for his beautiful songs, and in this movement one beautiful melody followed another. There were good dynamic contrasts and the rhythm was complex. The pianist had running 32nd notes in one hand against 16th notes in the other. For all its complexity, this *Andante* ended with a whisper. The *Scherzo* was quick and sprightly with *spiccato* in the strings. The theme was repeated with increasing difficulty. The *Trio*, as a contrast, had smooth, legato playing in the strings and light staccato piano passages. The *Scherzo* was then repeated, because the classical third movement is often in ABA form.

The *Rondo* movement is light and carefree in spirit. Unison passages in the violin and 'cello had flawless intonation. This movement was almost playful with difficult trills in the cellist's part, sometimes having to cross strings. When one analyzes Schubert's music in college, it is easy to spot repetitions. He rarely used a melody once, but it appears again and again with variations. The rhythm switched from 3/2 (3 half notes to a measure) to 2/4. Tremolos in the piano contrasted with long sustained notes in the strings. The pianist climbed up almost to the top of his keyboard and then dropped down again as the magnificent work drew to a close with two resounding chords.

The audience applauded wildly and gave these talented artists a standing ovation. A warm and loving encore - Schubert's *Standchen* or *Serenade* was heard. It tells the tale of a young man trying to entice a young girl "to come down and spend some time in the meadow with him." Some of the professional musicians in the San Francisco Symphony I've played with, have felt this trio was too schmalzy. However, the rich melodies and beautiful harmonies have always made it a personal favorite.

The Felici Trio, in residence at Mammoth Lakes, California, demonstrated superb musicianship throughout, and each musician listened to the other, creating true chamber music at its best. It's a shame that the hall was only about half filled, but those who were there were wildly enthusiastic and gave the ensemble many curtain calls. How lucky we are to have Del Valle Fine Arts present us with such talented and gifted performers. Circle your calendars for their next concert of the Gleusteen-Ordronneau Duo (a violin and piano duo) on January 9, 2009.