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Merling Trio at Marcus JCC in Dunwoody

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By Pierre Ruhe

The Merling Trio, Sunday at the Marcus Jewish Community Center, in Dunwoody.
www.atlantajcc.org.

The Marcus Jewish Community center in Dunwoody, which opened in 2000, has its chamber music series up and running- with only a few knots left to untie. The three concert inaugural season concluded Sunday afternoon with a performance by the Michigan-based Merling Trio.

It is all part of a trend. Chamber music in the suburbs is the fastest growing sector of metro Atlanta's classical music scene. Several new (albeit small) series debuted in 2004-05, with another preparing to launch in the fall.

The reasons are simple. As Atlanta continues to sprawl, a once-outlying 'burb like Dunwoody solidifies and develops its own infrastructure. For the presenter- be it a house of worship, community center or college- a start-up chamber music season is economical and tidy to deliver, at least compared with other performing arts.

Chamber music is also one of the quickest ways to establish a serious arts presence in the neighborhood (or congregation or campus). Ironically, as a suburb tries to nurture its own cultural needs, the impact can extend far beyond the community.

A little of that happened Sunday. The high point of the concert came with Smetana's G minor Piano Trio, a colorful, high-calorie work that sounds like a mini-symphony in scope. The three Merling musicians, each affiliated with Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Mich., played with a sound that's attractive, substantive and a bit earthy.

This last attribute came mostly from violinist Renata Artman Knific's sweet, ripe tone and expressive, charmingly rough-hewn phrasing. Her playing of this Czech music left a lasting impression. She was complemented by cellist Bruce Uchimura's red-wine timbre. Susan Wiersma Uchimura drew rounded tones from the Steinway model B- a smaller instrument suitable for the center's small Frank Theatre.

Beethoven's Piano Trio Op. 1, No. 1- his first published piece- also received a gutsy, sympathetic reading. In one of the afternoon's quirks, Marcus' concert series director Mark Bernat toted his double bass on stage as a warm-up to the main act. He played Ernest Bloch's "prayer" and, after intermission, the Israeli National Anthem. His well-meaning (but out of tune and beside the point) performance hampered a series that aspires to professional standards.

