

## **Cleveland (OH) The Plain Dealer**

### **Trio's rich performance resonates at museum**

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**By Wilma Salisbury**

The Merling Trio performed with the warmth of a family coming home to play for friends Sunday afternoon at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Graduates of the Cleveland Institute of Music, violinist Renata Artman Knific, cellist Bruce Uchimura and pianist Susan Wiersma Uchimura formed their ensemble in 1987. The trio was resident ensemble at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo and recently made its debut on an album of works by fellow faculty member Curtis O.B. Curtis-Smith.

Curtis-Smith's Second Piano Trio was one of two 20<sup>th</sup> century pieces on the ensemble's museum program. The repertoire also included Leon Kirchner's Piano Trio (1954) and Dvorak's Piano Trio in F minor, Op. 65. Before performing the Dvorak, Knific commented about her fondness for Cleveland and dedicated the work's slow movement to her grandmother.

The recital opened with the Kirchner trio, a skillfully crafted nonverbal music drama that treats the strings and piano as separate but equal partners. In the first movement, bold contrasts of tempo and mood develop a lyrical idea. In the second, the music unfolds in long, flowing lines, led first by one voice, then another.

The language is atonal, the subject serious, the form original. A daring choice to play as an opening work, the piece introduced.

Curtis-Smith's trio was easily accessible by comparison. Based on African tribal rhythms, the outer movements treat the strings and piano as melody instruments celebrating a joyous event in rhythmic counterpoint. The dreamy middle movement, a set of variations on the composer's song setting of a Theodore Roethke poem, retains the thin texture. But because the tempo is slow, the linear texture results in sweet harmonies. Commissioned for the ensemble's New York debut two years ago, the crowd-pleasing piece received an energetic performance.

In the Dvorak trio, the strings achieved an ideal match of tone and dynamics, but the pianist sometimes went overboard with dry articulation and percussive attacks. In general though, the players shaped a grand interpretation, fluent in rhythm, clear in structure and rich in romantic feeling.

Especially effective were the allegretto, which came alive with exciting dance rhythms, and the songful adagio, which was played (for grandmother) with heartfelt sentiment.