

## **The heart and art of chamber music: The Merling Trio at InConcert Sierra**

*By Charles Atthill, Special to The Prospector*

A chamber music group is like a marriage. The Merling Trio, who performed recently at InConcert Sierra, actually is a marriage. Well almost. Pianist Susan Wiersma Uchimura and cellist Bruce Uchimura have been married for 25 years, and with violinist Renata Artman Knific have played together as a trio for 23 years. Other trios and quartets may have lasted longer, but with changes in the line-up.

To be a successful and enduring trio takes work. It's not just the long hours, the individual commitment, the ongoing practicing, scales, and exercises. It's the constant playing together, building personal and musical respect, creating and maintaining a repertoire. "Politicians," said Susan, "should play chamber music." Diplomats too might learn from the Merling's blending of their Dutch, Polish and Hawaiian backgrounds. The performance was more than enough to convince the large and responsive audience of the harmony of the trio.

Beethoven opened the program. "Is Beethoven a classical composer," mused Bruce in the pre-concert discussion, "or a romantic? Or is he just Beethoven?"

The power and depth of the third piano trio was enough to shock the classical Haydn, who was briefly Beethoven's teacher. The opening movement tosses musical ideas back and forth in conversational but robust intimacy. Five variations on a simple hymn-like theme juxtapose the instruments. The stately minuet is introspective, and the fast and argumentative finale ("manic," said Bruce) ends in genial resolution, all crafted by the Merling with superb clarity and seamless interplay.

Two pieces by Astor Piazzolla, Argentinian by birth, Italian by descent, New Yorker for much of his life, were the meat in a Germanic musical sandwich. Piazzolla, exponent of the bandoneon, relative of the accordion, fuses tango and jazz with the classical. The sultry Oblivion is brooding, yet passionate, a vehicle for Bruce's cello solo. "No-one plays it better than my husband," said Susan. Primavera Porteno, Spring from Piazzolla's Four Seasons, contrasted pulsing rhythmic vigor with a yearning cello theme.

And to end, Brahms' second piano trio: "a passionate epic, one of the greatest parts of our repertoire," said Renata. Sometimes the strings must play in sonorous unison to match the piano's power. A lush and moody Hungarian theme and poignantly beautiful variations held the audience pin-drop quiet. An unusually dark scherzo with a soaring trio section yielded to the festive fireworks of the finale. It's huge and hot-blooded, showing the Merling's ardor and skill in what Renata called "a rich, complex puzzle for the performers."

After a standing ovation Susan commented: “The Merling was so ready to play an encore it would only have taken one of you to stand up!” Appropriately the encore was the Gypsy Rondo by Haydn, the father of the piano trio genre.

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*Charles Atthill lives in Alta Sierra. He recently attended a concert in England by one of America’s leading string quartets. They did not get a standing ovation.*



The Merling Trio performing at InConcert Sierra, November 20, 2011