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Merling Trio charms with old, new works

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More than names changed when the original Fontana organization and the Chamber Music Society joined forces. The resulting Fontana Chamber Arts emerged a markedly new, dynamic entity.

Consider Thursday night's program featuring the Merling Trio at the Wellspring Theatre. Here was an outstanding local trio with an international reputation playing a charming Haydn trio from 1789, a transcription of tango music completed in 1970 by Astor Piazzolla, and the world premiere of Frank Proto's quirky, demanding Quartet for Piano and Strings.

Such a span of styles and sounds could have proven daunting with conventional expectations. Instead, what the audience heard was provocative and stimulating, opening listener ears to new sound possibilities- precisely the goal of Fontana Chamber Arts.

To prove it could perform traditional chamber music as well as avant-garde, the trio- violinist Renata Artman Knific, cellist Bruce Uchimura and pianist Susan Wiersma Uchimura- offered an elegant reading of Haydn's Piano Trio in C minor. In the opening section, Knific and Bruce Uchimura created silky, honeyed tones. Major and minor modes alternated, with the violin representing the major and the minor. Susan Uchimura enjoyed more of the spotlight in the second movement, where her crystal-clear runs, scales and chromatics dominated. Piazzolla's "De Las Cuatro Estaciones Portenas" proved a fascinating work, translatable as "The Four Porteno (e.g., Buenos Aires) Seasons." Inspired by Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons," the four-part work echoed the composer's roots in "new tango" music built on the bandoneon, an accordion popular in South America.

Each section aimed to evoke a different season. The violin excelled, with marvelously smooth, singing lines in the summer section, while the piano set tonal and tempo pace in the autumn and spring portions. The cello sound was warm and mellow throughout but never fussy. For overall impressiveness, the winter section stood out. Beginning in unison, this part quickly branched out, with the strings playing melody over piano accompaniment. But Piazzolla's fertile composition provided sudden shifts in mood, allowing the piano center stage.

Many in the audiences were primarily interested in Proto's new work commissioned by the trio. Bassist Tom Knific joined the ensemble in all four movements, playing splendidly. Proto, who was present, spoke briefly beforehand, encouraging listeners to give the work a fair hearing. What they heard was an intriguing combination of contemporary dissonant harmonies integrated with phrases from jazz, blues and even "Sweet Georgia brown." Concluding Proto's work was a fourth movement simply

marked “Fast,” with long passages of spirited music urged on by the piano. Eventually, the tempo slowed and earlier themes resurfaced to evoke a sense of enjoyable recognition.