

Musical Opinion

Merling Trio at St. John's

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By Malcolm Miller

With its eclectic *mélange* of jazz influences within a classical three-movement format, Frank Proto's zestful Quarter for Piano and Strings, which unusually includes double bass, made a powerful impression at its European premiere at St. John's, Smith Square, on 10 June. The quartet formed the centerpiece of the UK debut programme by the Merling Trio, currently in residence at Western Michigan University. After a rather *avant-garde* slow introduction, the opening movement develops into a blues pattern for the trio which frames a swinging improvisation by the bassist Tom Knific, a well known jazz and classical player, echoed by a propulsive piano solo from Susan Wiersma Uchimura. The serious heart of the piece is the slow movement, launched in a lyrical duet for violinist Renata Artman Knific and cellist Bruce Uchimura, with the ethereal, almost atonal jazz harmony underpinned by an intriguing microtonal slide and *pizzicato* double-bass ostinato, which evolves into a solo answered by the piano. If the rumbustious finale, with its rapid references to John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, skillfully exemplified the vibrant, often witty, combination of expressive gesture with improvisational jazz elements characteristic of many current crossover idioms, the work as a whole made a compelling case for Frank Proto's distinctive style, which deserves far greater exposure in Britain.

The Merling's musical treats, which began earlier with Haydn's trio in C minor, reached a climax with the captivating *De Las Cuatro Estaciones Portenas* by Astor Piazzolla, a work whose debt to Vivaldi is evident in its overall inspiration, from the sultry slow *TangoSummer* and the waltzing *Winter* with its rich string doublings, to the faster, more fluid *Autumn* and exuberant *Spring*. Yet there is an overt allusion to the Baroque master at the close of *Winter* in a sequence repeated fourfold in varied instrumentation. Piazzolla, of Italian ancestry, dared successfully to recast Argentinian *Nuevo Tango* in concert garb, and the Merling drew out his chromatic, often very dissonant textures, expressive changes of rhythmic gear from slow melodic soliloquies to riveting rhythmic dances, and above all his melting melodies, with unabashed romanticism and finesse. I hope British audiences will soon have a renewed opportunity to hear this excellent ensemble in similarly delightful, unfamiliar repertoire.