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REVIEW

## Review: Turtle Island quartet, guest pianist bring down the house at Four Arts



By KEVIN WILT

Special to the Daily News

On Wednesday night, the famed Turtle Island String Quartet brought its distinct sound to The Society of the Four Arts, with a special guest, pianist Cyrus Chestnut, in tow.

Sporting some colorful concert attire, and a loose, fun attitude, the quintet playfully jammed through an evening of music titled “Jelly, Rags, and Monk.”

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After an opening number, the quartet performed *Rebirth of the Holy Fool*, composed by Turtle Island violinist David Balakrishnan. This piece was an interesting fusion of jazz, bluegrass and even classical quartet music in parts. It was also marked by guitar-style playing in the viola, and the characteristic percussive “chops” found in many Turtle Island arrangements.

Next, the quartet was joined by Chestnut in a performance of Jelly Roll Morton’s *Jungle Blues*, followed by *Golliwog’s Cakewalk* by French composer Claude Debussy, which launched into a third, unannounced number. In all three, Chestnut displayed a very gentle playing style, although he was never too quiet. This style was particularly interesting in *Ruby, My Dear* by Thelonious Monk, a pianist known for his somewhat violent, percussive, stabbing piano technique. That Chestnut was able to emulate this element of Monk’s playing without losing sight of his own delicate technique speaks volumes to his ability and self-awareness as an artist.

Closing the first half was *Bouncing with Bud*, written by jazz piano legend Bud Powell.

It should be noted that almost none of the tunes on this concert were originally written for string quartet or piano quintet. The arrangements put together by Turtle Island almost have the same flavor as those by famed Sinatra arranger Nelson Riddle. The strings are always playing music that is very idiomatic, making full use of their timbre, and not just being treated as a substitute for a saxophone or bass.

After the intermission, Chestnut played a few solos: a highly stylized *Minuet in G* by Johann Sebastian Bach, and a classically inspired improvisation on the hymn *Old Rugged Cross*. He then reintroduced the quartet, as the five played a few more rags, and a few more tunes by Monk.

There were several interesting things about this concert, other than just hearing amazing music. Never, at any moment, did you remember that this is a string quartet in the traditional sense, and that was a very good thing. It is also not as simple as saying that Turtle Island is a jazz string quartet either. All in all, this concert seemed to be about 30 percent jazz, and 70 percent improvisation in other styles and genres. The Turtle Island Quartet is its own invention, and the members embrace it. They, along with Chestnut, see themselves, not just as performers, but as educators and ambassadors sharing this music they so care about.

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