

Jason Vieaux, Guitar

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Free beer, fantastic playing make for fine Fontana 'Downtown' concert

By Lynn Turner | Kalamazoo Gazette MLive.com

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KALAMAZOO -- With free beer and a dazzling lineup of performers, Fontana Chamber Arts launched its first "Downtown" series concert Friday night at Wellspring Theatre before a capacity audience.

The concert title, "Bel Canto: The World of Paganini," seemed confusing if not downright misleading. There were no singers in the program and only one reference to opera, in Nicolo Paganini's Introduction and Variations on "Nel cor piu non mi sento," for solo violin. Also, Paganini's "world" was expanded well beyond his lifetime to include J.S. Bach and a work by the concert's cellist, Robert deMaine.

To be fair, the concert was in the spirit of Paganini because of its focus on virtuoso performance and lightweight music. The exception was the Bach Ciacona from Partita No. 2 in D Minor for solo violin, a musical masterpiece that requires prodigious virtuosity.

Italian violinist Roberto Cani was well up to the task. Although his interpretation might not have pleased baroque purists, no one can fault his incredible technique. He also was truly magnificent in the Paganini "Nel cor piu non sento," based on an opera aria by Giovanni Paisiello. It requires fast left-hand pizzicato during rapid bouncing of the bow in spiccato and ricochet strokes, and it features devilishly difficult harmonics in double stops.

Equally as brilliant as Cani's technique was the tone and intonation of deMaine. Principal cellist of the Detroit Symphony, he demonstrated both his playing skill and compositional prowess in three of his Etude-caprices. Employing a bagpipe tune in one, a Brazilian folk song in another and drawing upon pure fantasy in the third, each was filled with formidable technical challenges that deMaine negotiated almost effortlessly.

The most tasteful playing of the concert came from guitarist Jason Vieaux. In his only solo opportunity, he made delightful music of Mauro Giuliani's Grand Overture, Op. 61, a work modeled on Rossini's overtures. Working within the guitar's limited power and ability to sustain pitch, Vieaux produced a wealth of subtle dynamics and soaring lyricism.

Fontana director Abhijit Sengupta joined the other musicians in chamber works by Paganini

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to showcase his superb talent on viola. Though Sengupta was dominant in most of the Terzetto concertante in D Major for viola, cello and guitar, Vieaux made the bigger impression with his exquisite solo playing in the Minuetto movement.

Sengupta showed more of his considerable lyrical and technical abilities in the "Maestoso" movement of Quartetto No. 15 in A Minor for viola, violin, cello and guitar.

The fantastic performances, the intimate setting of the Wellspring Theatre and no doubt the beer made Fontana's inaugural Downtown series concert an overwhelming success.

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