

Turtle Island's virtuosity shines in classical fusion

Sunday, November 20, 2005

PHILLIP RATLIFF

For the Birmingham News

If one were to go on mere descriptions, it sounds like nothing new: Unite jazz and classical music to form a hybrid musical genre. Composer Gunther Schuller did it in the 1960s and called it Third Stream. Decades earlier, the syncopations of jazz and ragtime crept into Stravinsky's and Honegger's chamber works. In the 1980s, Dave Brubeck mixed oratorio with jazz by placing his quartet in front of a traditional choir.

More recently, the virtuoso musicians of the Turtle Island String Quartet have discovered a unique, compelling vision of a jazz-classical art form. TISQ's musical fusion entails mixing the rhythmic and tonal language of jazz, especially the bop of the 1950s, with a decidedly classical group of instruments. As their intellectually engaging, technically dazzling and emotionally rich concert attested Friday evening at the Alys Stephens Center, the combination of jazz standards by John Coltrane and Miles Davis with the intricate musical world of the string quartet can yield satisfying results.

One of those was TISQ's take-no-prisoners version of Miles Davis' eponymous composition "Milestones." TISQ's take featured violinist and TISQ founder David Balakrishnan in a dizzying improvised solo and Mark Summer performing pizzicato passages that were as much drum set as bass line. The inner voices contributed to the overall funkiness of the effect with a percussive bow technique akin to an electric guitar.

In addition to adding color and rhythm, Summer, along with second violinist Evan Price and violist Mads Tolling, demonstrated a commanding ability to improvise in the swift, angular style made famous by jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli.

Pianist and composer Kenny Barron joined TISQ for "Infusion," a genre-bender not only for its jazz-inspired rhythmic and tonal elements and classical instrumentation. As Balakrishnan described it, "Infusion" was composed in a sort of swap-four fashion; that is, each member of the TISQ contributed to each of the piece's four movements. Despite the patchwork method, or maybe because of it, "Infusion" proved a remarkably fluid composition, with the conversational ensemble work one expects from a top-tier classical piano quintet.