

by Daniel Hathaway & Mike Telin



The Imani Winds, the ground-breaking woodwind quintet whose members are all of African American or Latino heritage and whose players include two composers (flutist and founder Valerie Coleman and hornist Jeff Scott), and two Oberlin Conservatory graduates (oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz and bassoonist Monica Ellis) in addition to clarinetist Mariam Adam, will release their fifth CD on the E1 label on August 24. *Terra Incognita*, recorded in December, 2009 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, features three compositions by well-known Jazz composers Wayne Shorter, Paquito D’Rivera and Jason Moran.

What is Imani up to here? Is the quintet, who make prominent references to their classical training, trying to cross the border over into Jazz as some of the promotional materials would lead one to believe? Rest easy, Imani fans. The Imani has commissioned three Jazz musicians deeply grounded in composition -- who are really no strangers to classical techniques -- to write within the structures of classical music and for the particular style in which classical musicians play their instruments. The results are fascinating, even if some of the pieces fall a bit short of the coherence classical listeners

have come to expect, and even if some listeners end up being disappointed that the Imani Winds don’t “swing” in the way that Jazz fans might expect.

The first four tracks are devoted to Jason Moran’s *Cane*, commissioned by the Mary Flager Charitable Trust and the Kimmel Center and premiered in October 2008 at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. A reminiscence about his family’s history in the rural Louisiana town of Natchitoches, “Togo to Natchitoches” grabs one’s attention with flute, horn and bassoon solos over nervous, syncopated rhythms. “Coin Coin’s Narrative” also has nervous, repetitive elements, this time from the flute and bassoon, punctuated by chords and chattering from various instruments. Those unsettled rhythms come back in “Gens Libre de Couleur”, but grounded by Stravinsky-like dissonant chords. “Natchitoches to New York” begins with broad chord strokes which eventually become syncopated and lead on to cheerful oboe and flute tunes and jazzy, bluesy horn licks before the chords return. A swirl of notes brings the suite to an end.

Wayne Shorter’s *Terra Incognita*, which gives the album its name, appears in two forms: a 14-1/2 minute version and a 9 minute version that will only be available on iTunes. Commissioned by the La Jolla Music Society, the Krannert Center, Da Camera of Houston and the Library of Congress, “The Unknown Land” is Shorter’s first work for a non-Jazz ensemble. It begins with horn calls answered by oboe, both of whom bend their notes jazzily. A series of fascinating rhythmic figures leads to a hocket-like dialogue between horn and bassoon, then to an oboe solo accompanied by talkative winds. Atonal scamperings and dissonant parallel chords lead on to fragmented melodies accompanied by tweets and plunks. The longer version ends with similar parallel chords and a blare from the horn. The shorter version seems more successful in terms of cohesiveness -- the longer version becomes episodic as ideas are taken up and cast away in favor of new ones. We suspect that the piece calls for improvisatory contributions from the players, and what we heard on the disc is not always

quite the way things will be done the next time.

Cuban American composer Paquito D’Rivera takes a trip down memory lane with his commission, remembering the joy of flying kites and hearing wind chimes in his native Havana. *Kites over Havana* and *Wind Chimes* represent another joint commission, this time from Fontana Chamber Arts, the Newman Center, Carver Community Cultural Center, the Rogers Fund for Arts and the Iman Winds.

D’Rivera’s piece brings pianist Alex Brown and the composer himself, playing clarinet, into the mix, allowing for a broader palette of sounds. Probably the most free-flowing and jazziest piece on the CD, D’Rivera’s music is sheerly fun, although the introduction of spoken lines at the beginning and end seems a little hokey. *Kites* is busy and breezy, beginning with a lush bassoon cadenza and roudades over a syncopated bass. Piano motives are commented upon by the winds and four-note figures are tossed around through the ensemble. The winds die down at the end, leaving bassoon and piano to fade out alone.

*Wind Chimes* features a piano solo based on the whole-tone scale and ends with a clarinet solo over a Habenera-like rhythm in the piano which almost turns into a jazzy passacaglia with counterpoint from clarinet and flute. Oddly menacing unisons following the second spoken phrase terminate

in clarinet giggles tossed off to the bass clarinet and piccolo and a final dazzle of sound.

Throughout the CD, the Imani are an impressively virtuosic quintet, faultless in ensemble, winning in tone quality and fully capable of every challenge the three composers have thrown at them. The recording is remarkable for its clarity and warmth.

The woodwind quintet is a strange creature -- something of an ugly cousin to the string quartet. Those who wrote most extensively for the medium (Danzi, Reicha) are hardly first rate composers, and repertory provided by leading composers (Barber, Nielsen, Hindemith, Schoenberg) doesn’t represent their most distinguished work. Groups like the Imani Winds have contributed vastly to the viability of the medium in the 21st century, and commissions like the three which appear on “Terra Incognita” represent invaluable additions to the range of possibilities for the odd combination of flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon. Brava! to the Imani (four of whom are women -- and Bravo! to Jeff Scott) for their foresight in mounting such projects.

The Imani Winds will appear twice in Northeast Ohio this season, on Sunday, April 3 at 3 pm on the Wooster Chamber Music Series at The College of Wooster, and on Monday, April 4 at 7:30 at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron on the Tuesday Musical Association Series.

