

Saxophone sensation heats up Chamber Orchestra



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(Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

James Carter lifted his soprano sax and wailed into the stratosphere. Then he switched to tenor, and began an astonishing section of “slap-tonguing” – a rhythmic display that crackled and popped. His artistry brought down the house at the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra’s “Summermusik” festival Saturday night.

That moment in a work written for him, **“Caribbean Rhapsody,”** was just one of the **highlights of the Chamber Orchestra’s fascinating journey led by Sarah Ioannides,** a candidate for music director. In a season where each candidate has

brought his or her A-game (four of the five are being heard this summer), **Ioannides stretched boundaries with an extraordinary program that spanned the worlds of classical and jazz.**

The concert in Corbett Theater at the School for Creative and Performing Arts included the world premiere live performance of “Caribbean Rhapsody” (Carter has recorded it) by Puerto Rico-born composer Roberto Sierra. Carter also performed as part of the 17-piece ensemble in Darius Milhaud’s jazzy “La Création du Monde,” accompanied by a film created by Brad McCombs of Northern Kentucky University. In keeping with the irresistible French theme that has woven through this season, the first half included **a stunning performance of Francis Poulenc’s rarely heard “Sinfonietta.”**



James Carter (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

Carter is a notable recording artist and virtuoso of the saxophone, who seems to be able to do just about anything on his instrument. The Detroit native explained in a pre-concert talk that Sierra wrote “Caribbean Rhapsody” for him and his cousin, the violinist Regina Carter. The Chamber Orchestra commissioned the orchestral version played on Saturday, featuring Carter on saxophones.

The piece, performed after intermission, is a hybrid of a classical concerto and jazz improvisation, infused with the atmosphere of Latin jazz. The “Rhapsody” opened with a gently swinging bolero. Carter played its sensuous melody on soprano sax, backed by a warm carpet of strings in the orchestra. His improvisations were both fluid and brilliant. Even in his most explosive moments, one could only marvel at the nuance and control of his sound.

As the piece merged into Latin salsa, he picked up his tenor sax for a vibrant, syncopated dialogue with the orchestra. Ioannides was an alert partner, and the orchestra echoed the soloist with split-second precision. Listeners were on their feet.

Carter's encores were unforgettable. There was Astor Piazzolla's haunting "Oblivion," with improvisations tinged with blues in a gorgeous arrangement with orchestra and piano (Christina Haan). "Bossa J.C.," a bossa nova from his album "Present Tense" was swinging, joyous and fun.

Carter, who sat in at the Greenwich jazz club on Thursday, was also performing at the Art Museum with the CCO winds on Sunday.

Ioannides opened the program's second half with another jazz-inspired piece: Darius Milhaud's "The Creation of the World," influenced by jazz that the French composer had heard in Harlem. Written as a ballet in 1923, it tells the creation story based on African folk mythology.

With Carter on saxophone, **the lean orchestration had an arresting timbre, and Ioannides' leadership was deft and energetic. One could only marvel at its witty syncopations, its wonderful jazz fugue and superb contributions from orchestral soloists.**

For a multimedia touch, McCombs, a faculty member at NKU, created an inventive film – fusing his own imagery in the Overture with artworks from Cincinnati Art Museum and even the conductor Ioannides. It was perfectly synched to the music, all the way to "The Kiss."

The highlight of the evening's first half was Poulenc's "Sinfonietta." Poulenc and Milhaud were both members of "Les Six," six composers who strove for a lean, witty style in post-World War I France. **Ioannides' reading of this ravishing gem was fresh and vivid.**

From the first movement, which alternates between the clear, neo-classical textures and lush movie music, **it was a wonderful discovery. The conductor made the most of its humorous outbursts and shaped Poulenc's lovely French melodies beautifully. Best of all, she allowed every orchestral solo to emerge from the texture.**

The orchestra played superbly. The second movement's "molto vivace" sparkled and every moment was interesting. The slow movement balanced wistful melodies for clarinet and oboe against lush strings. **The finale, a stunning dialogue of witty tunes and staccato brass, was given an impressive performance by the orchestra. In an acoustically challenging hall, it was the best-balanced performance of the season.**



Sarah Ioannides (Photo: Provided/Philip Groshong)

To open, the conductor whipped up energy in Overture to “The Marriage Contract,” written by a teen-aged Rossini.

The Chamber Orchestra continues with a “Chamber Crawl”, 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Sanctuary in Newport. The season concludes with the final candidate, Eckart Preu, 8 p.m. in SCPA’s Corbett Theater. Tickets: 513-723-1182, ccocincinnati.org.