Great performances at UVM and CVU highlight a great weekend of theater and music

The Lane Series

The California Guitar Trio -- Paul Richards, Bert Lams and Hideyo Moriya -- with special guest Natalia Zukerman where the featured performers last Friday evening, October 26, at the UVM Redstone Recital Hall.

The Trio members, who joined forces in 1991 in Los Angeles and took the name of California Guitar Trio, are actually from Utah, Belgium and Japan. According to Richards, they have been on the road almost continually since 1991, and they have played locally in the past at Higher Ground. The SRO crowd probably knew for the most part what they were coming to hear. This reviewer did not, but it soon became apparent that these three guitarists have an expertise and a facility on their instruments that places them in a category of bravura performers on any instrument.

The most phenomenal playing of the evening came in their transcription of a Bach prelude, where each of the three played every third note only, some passages so rapidly that one could not tell who was playing what. What that told the audience is how carefully they listen to one another -- a skill too frequently not found in any musicians, whether vocal or instrumental, who are playing before the public today.

They had their own version also of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, more in the spirit of the disco version of some years past than the original composer's, it served its purpose -- mainly introducing us to the wit of this group of musicians. Their transcription of a Beethoven piano Sonata was also ear-opening in what it could tell us about the music (this one Beethoven would have liked). Their final number, played acoustically -- as was the rest of the program -- but without any amplification, was paradigmatic for soft guitar sound played on steel strings.

They did not limit themselves to transcriptions of classical works, but ranged from the pop all the way up to the classical and back again. Their unique method of tuning the strings, which followed the tuning for cello, viola and violin, as they noted, made it possible to play transcriptions of works which otherwise would not have been possible on guitars.

They were sensational and truly musical, no matter what period or genre they played.

Zukerman opened for them. She comes from a musical family (Pinchas, Eugenia and Arianna), and therefore her playing is quite wonderful. Her songs are also noteworthy for the quality of her lyrics, as well as for their melodic content. She has obviously studied folk music in particular, and her clear, true, soprano voice is pleasant to listen to, as are the lyrics. Her lyrics and her stage persona show her to be not only intelligent but truly witty.

As usual, spending time with The Lane Series once again proved to be one of the best ways to spend your Friday evenings in Vermont (I personally am changing TGIF to TGILS).

Champlain Valley Union High School

At the invitation of a friend, I went to CVU Saturday afternoon, October 27, to see a production of Hot Mikado, a 1940s-sounding version of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic. The old adage about time flying when one is enjoying oneself certainly proved true in the case of this production, directed and choreographed by Sebastian Ryder, because as I was leaving, I was astonished to note that I had been in the theater two hours and 10 minutes.

What made the experience so enjoyable? The first ingredient was Jacob Tischler, a KoKo of such physical plasticity and ingenuity, as well as an intellectual understanding of the role, that he created a Lord High Executioner who made of "Tit-Willow" the showstopper it was designed to be. He obviously enjoyed the limelight, but no matter what he was doing -- including some time-passing balancing tricks for the audience before the actual show started -- he was completely in control of everything he did. An amazing performance!

Another Tischler, Ethan, played the part of Nanki-Poo very well and sang his part with some ease. Alex Johnson, who played Pooh-Bah, displayed a real understanding of the text and sang in what may be a true bass voice. The parts of the three girls from school were played by Amy Dunki-Jacobs, Martha Waterman, and Amelia Munson, who did a commendable job in their roles. Another standout was Dan Leibman as the Mikado, who didn't swing dance, but tap-danced. Finally, there was an imposing Katisha who must remain anonymous, because her name was left off the program together with her character's' name through the inadvertence of the director.

Hats off to the entire production – the dancing, the singing, the costuming, the lighting, the total engagement of the cast! The performance went off without a hitch even though it was conductorless and the band was ranged along the back wall of the stage where the singers could not see them.

Plaudits also to its director, who obviously made the circumstances of the plot so highly understandable to the cast, that they were able to achieve the success that they did achieve. Stage pictures were excellent and the choreography was inspired!

Burlington Chamber Orchestra

Saturday evening October 27 brought a return to the Redstone Recital Hall for me and the debut of the Burlington Chamber Orchestra under the baton of Michael Hopkins, Music Director. It was an auspicious beginning for the new chamber orchestra, and a near capacity audience enjoyed the music immensely, judging from the applause.

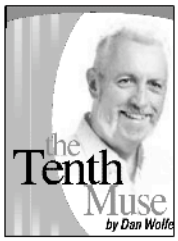
The program featured works by Handel, Elgar, Hindemith and Bloch, with cellist John Dunlop as the featured soloist.

The work by Handel that was chosen was the Concerto Grosso, Op.6 no. 1 (it is intended that over the next twelve concerts that all twelve of these Concerti Grossi will be played). The approach was stylistically correct. The playing was clean and clear, the tempi just. There was clarity and appropriate balance between the ripieni and the solo instruments.

The Elgar Serenade for Strings, Op. 20, was played warmly, and its indebtedness especially to Brahms was very clear in the playing. The moodiness of the work also was quite clear.

The second half of the concert produced two less frequently heard works: Trauermusik (Music of Mourning) by Hindemith, in which Dunlop played the cello solo, and Concerto Grosso No. 1 for String Orchestra with Piano Obbligato, by Ernest Bloch.

Hindemith's music seems currently unfashionable, if one considers its absence from concert repertoire as a gauge. This is shameful, in my opinion, for not only is there an intellectual component to his music that is very satisfying, it tends also to be highly idiomatic for the instruments for which it is scored. His sound is quite unique, his approach to composition in the mainstream of 20th-century technique. This particular piece, which Dunlop performed impeccably, was a work written on the spot and performed with the ink not quite dry when Hindemith arrived in England for a concert, only to discover that George V had just died and a work which he had come to perform would need to be set aside. The fourth movement of the work contains a setting of the doxology, over which the cello mutters and comments. The entire work is of a piece, and the performance encompassed all the needs of the music, especially its spirit and mood.



The Bloch has always been a favorite work of mine. I had a recording of it when I was in high school that I played so frequently I almost wore it out. It is a work of the imagination and obeisance to the past. The addition of the piano was in stark contrast to the presence of harpsichord in the Handel work, being not only a continuo part at times, but essentially an obbligato part in contrast to the strings. It was a particular pleasure therefore for me to hear this fine performance -- unmarred even by a slight hiccup in the metrically tricky third movement.

Hopkins made intelligent running comments on each of their works presented, as well as attending to the production of the music itself. He has considerable gumption to have launched this needed professional chamber orchestra, and it will certainly fill a vacancy locally. Three other concerts are planned for this season, all for strings. The plan is, apparently, to add woodwinds in the future and other parts ad hoc.

Based on the performance, this is potentially a truly positive addition to the musical life of the area. May they succeed even beyond their expectations!

Burlington resident Dan Wolfe observes and critiques the local arts scene for the Times Sentinel. His column appears weekly.