

Rumbarroco bridges early music and Latin rhythms delightfully

By Peter James Learn



Rumbarroco put on a stellar show for a packed hall Saturday night at St. Martha's Church in Miami Shores. An ensemble of world-class musicians, the group focuses on intercultural fusion between musical traditions, including early European music of the Renaissance and Baroque and its confluence with the music of the Americas. The event opened Saint Martha's 2014-15 concert series, operated in conjunction with Yamaha Pianos.

Laury Gutiérrez, guitarist/gamba player and the ensemble's founding director, emceed the evening's proceedings and proved a warmly engaging host, introducing the works while the musicians tuned their delicate period instruments. There was a clear holiday flavor in the program, with many works dealing with Christmas and the Nativity.

Right out of the gate, Kera Washington's virtuosity on her various hand-percussion instruments drew immediate attention. Her initial solo in the opening 15th-century *Propiñon de Melyor* (con Son Cubano) by Anonymous had the audience clapping along to the syncopated dance rhythms. The full ensemble coalesced around Tal Shalom-Kobi's bass ostinatos in this selection, with Catherine Stein performing melodies on a period trumpet. (She switched to Baroque recorders and shawms for most of the other selections.)

Another high point of the concert was the nuanced and technically deft guitar and cuatro playing of Carlos Sulbarán. In the Venezuelan *Joropo*, which the ensemble paired with Pedro de Escobar's 15th-century *Virgen bendita sin par*, Sulbarán's solo at the climax of the lively dance piece was a glistening, wandering improvisation that nevertheless felt that it arrived logically where it needed to at exactly the right time.

An interesting contrast created by the combination of styles was the juxtaposition of vocal performance style. The singing was pure-toned, restrained, and with minimal vibrato when performing the European early music, but quickly turned colorful and exuberant in interpreting the Latin works. This dramatic shift of technique was adroitly handled by coloratura soprano Kimberly Ayers, countertenor Gerrod Pagenkopf, and baritone Brad Fugate, joined at times by Stein in a quartet texture.

Washington's stunning percussion technique was also apparent in her solos in *La Girigonça* (Baile cantado) and *Plena*, the latter of which was repeated in the second encore demanded of Rumbarroco by an enthusiastic audience. The first encore was a reprise of *Senhora del mundo*, which this time included extended and playfully competitive maraca solos by Alejandro Chávez and Sulbarán, each displaying impressive prowess on their instruments.

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