

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Harlem Quartet: Musical ambassadors

Mixing classical and jazz, members champion diversity in many forms

By Beth Wood | 10 a.m. Feb. 18, 2016 | Updated , 10:18 a.m.



Harlem Quartet: Ilmar Gavilán, Melissa White, Jaime Amador and Felix Umansky. *Courtesy photo*

Diversity is not just about people, as the Harlem Quartet demonstrates. Its members are African-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban and heartland American. A diverse group, yes, but they take it further. The quartet plays classical, jazz and Latin jazz, as well as old and newer pieces. The quartet has collaborated with a range of musicians, from legendary violinist and conductor Itzhak Perlman to acclaimed jazz pianist Chick Corea.

This variety is no accident.

The Sphinx Organization, a national group dedicated to diversity in the arts, started the Harlem Quartet in 2006, choosing winners of its annual competition. Of the original group, violinists Melissa White and Ilmar Gavilán are still members, rounded out by violist Jaime Amador and cellist Felix Umansky.

Gavilán, whose nickname in the group is “resident jazzier,” learned both jazz and classical in his native Cuba. But the quartet has played jazz since its inception and presents both genres at its concerts and its many teaching sessions.

“Usually we strike a balance between standard repertoire and something more accessible from American jazz,” said Gavilán, en route to a concert in Dorchester, Mass. “The jazz pieces are not just an encore, but are played side by side with the classical.”

The quartet's San Diego debut performance at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall on Friday — an ArtPower presentation — is a reflection of that. They will play Beethoven's String Quartet No. 4 in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4; Mendelssohn's String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 44, No. 2; Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia"; and Rafael Hernández Marín's "El Cumbanchero."

In keeping with the quartet's goals, it will host a workshop and performance for the students at the University of California San Diego's Preuss School.

"We feel that as modern artists, we should also be musical ambassadors," Gavilán said. "Our art form is no longer part of the curriculum at most schools around the country. We need to be available and accessible.

"If we just got onstage and performed to the existing audience, we would not be creating new audiences. We as artists believe we should relate to all people. That's been part of our mission since our founding."

One of the highlights for the Harlem Quartet was performing at the White House in 2009 for President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama. Gavilán said the members weren't nervous performing for the Obamas, but they did get the jitters talking with them and posing for photos.

Touring and performing at festivals, the Harlem Quartet has presented its unique approach to audiences around the world. Given that the quartet excels in both jazz and classical music, how does one influence the other?

"The classical genre affects jazz because we take the same search for excellence when it comes to execution," Gavilán explained. "We have the same codes of conduct in both. The other way around, jazz is the art of responding to each other in more of a spontaneous manner. We listen closely to each other. We are able to bring that communication and spontaneity to classical. We don't change a note or dynamic in the classical music we play, but bring the same kind of freshness as jazz."

Wood is a freelance writer.

© Copyright 2016 The San Diego Union-Tribune. All rights reserved.