

Concert Review: Neave Trio – ‘From America to the Moon’ (NYC Jan 5, 2018)

Jon Sobel January 8, 2018

The **Neave Trio** has made a specialty of American music (see [my review of their *American Moments* album](#)), and they continued the theme on a bone-chilling New York City evening the other day. Their “From America to the Moon” program, consisting of Leonard Bernstein’s youthful Piano Trio and new works from Russell Steinberg and Robert Paterson, heated things up with electric energy and easy virtuosity.

Though Bernstein was just a teenager at Harvard when he wrote his only Piano Trio, it reflects numerous deeply felt influences and presages the jazzy colors of his mature theatrical music. Immediately with the first movement, violinist Anna Williams, cellist Mikhail Veselov, and pianist Eri Nakamura displayed the firm cogency of years of working together, navigating with almost scary synchronization the playful pizzicato passages, the stormy interjections, the jokes, and the development’s multiple layers and keys. Then they carried into the second and third movements a full understanding of the piece’s seriousness and its fun, attacking the jazzy blue notes, swaying delicately through the lyrical atmospherics, and laying into the folksy dance rhythms with equal mastery.

We often speak of music evoking visual images, but **Russell Steinberg** made the idea manifest with the world premiere of “Paleface,” inspired by paintings by **Jerry Kearns** that combine Jesus imagery with American myth and kitsch in startling ways. Accompanied by Amanda Tiller’s video pans and zooms of these paintings, the Neave Trio brought Steinberg’s wild and inventive score to life.

I particularly enjoyed the first movements’ clever collage of galloping Wild West tropes and quotes from musical Americana. The inky loveliness of the closing movement encompassed warm melodies and rich harmonies that showed off the composer’s lyrical gifts. The middle movement displayed a mastery of compositional technique dressed up with playful moments and jazzy noir-esque motifs (“Pink Panther,” anyone?), though it shaded after awhile into what felt to me like generic-sounding modernism.

Robert Paterson’s piano trio was, if not programmatic, almost as graphical as “Paleface,” though without visual aids. Paterson is no stranger to visual imagery ([we premiered a video](#) from his risqué opera “Three Way” last year). All four short movements of “Moon Trio,” also quite a new piece, were inspired by the moon, evoking glints of moonlight through the trees, ethereal yet kinetic pastoral scenes, an explosive rocket journey, and a lively and entertaining if rather innocuous sort of lunacy. The first movement suggested cascading moonbeams with a Mozartian finesse, while the especially moving third movement, “Blue Moon,” felt like it could be a soundtrack to a staging of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

With persistent flair the musicians brought out the complex textures, jazzy rhythms, and moody drama of all three works on the program. Their name may be Gaelic, but they are young masters of both the classic and the modern “American” modes.