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Banjo master Michael J. Miles takes on Walt Whitman and jazz

Howard Reich - Jazz Critic

Chicago banjo whiz Michael J. Miles has launched some strange, ambitious ventures through the years.

He has penned a "Yellowbird Concerto" for banjo and orchestra, transformed music of blues pioneer Robert Johnson and jazz master Dave Brubeck and transcribed for his soft-spoken instrument two monuments of classical music: cello suites of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The man clearly does not dream small.

But his latest project will surprise even those who have to come to expect the unexpected of him: "Camerado Suite" sets poetry of Walt Whitman in a concerto for banjo, orchestra and jazz choir.

If that sounds preposterous, Miles renders it plausible, as a private recording of the world premiere performance last month at Niles North High School in Skokie attests. Thanks to the fluidity of Miles' solos, the enthusiasm of the students' interpretation and the inherently inspirational quality of Whitman's text, the four-movement work not only coheres but flies like the wind.

But how and why on earth did Miles arrive at such a seemingly unlikely project?

"I've always been a fan of Walt Whitman," says Miles, who will reprise the work with a somewhat smaller contingent of Niles North students Wednesday evening at the Poetry Foundation, 61 W. Superior St.

"Whitman is one of my, if not my very favorite poet. ... What (Woody) Guthrie and (Pete) Seeger did was take Whitman's ideas and package them," adds Miles, citing two major influences on his own work. "So you have 'This Land is Your Land,' instead of a long, extensive poem. It was the same sentiment, but shorter."

The lyrical, all-American spirit that courses through Whitman's poetry and echoes in the work of Guthrie, Seeger and others stands at the center of "Camerado Suite," which focuses on one stanza plus one additional line of Whitman's epic "Song of the Open Road." Imagine the following words of Whitman's sung by young voices, accompanied by ruddy strings and led by some fleet banjo work, and you have a sense of Miles' opus:

*Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself, before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?*

This culminating stanza of Whitman's poem, says Miles, "is his call to action: 'Camerado, I give you my hand.'

"I feel that I know these lines in the depth of my bones, more than any other poem," adds the musician, who quoted from the same work in his earlier, one-man show, "From Senegal to Seeger: Stories of the American Banjo."

"I have said these lines hundreds of times in performance, and they mean a great deal to me. And the line that is added (in Miles' new piece), 'These are the days that must happen to you' — adds to this urgency: Here is the world at your doorstep. Grab it. Go through it. Move forward. Life is this incredible gift. All you have to do is look out the window and see the magic."

The music Miles penned for the occasion, which was orchestrated and arranged for him by Ronald DeGrandis, conveys similar energy. Not via fast tempos but with bristling syncopation, ever-shifting meters and, of course, the bright-and-hopeful sounds of those youthful voices.

Miles, who has worked with public school students for years, pitched the idea for an ambitious opus to colleagues at Niles North High School, and when they said yes, he set to work. He began crafting melodies, harmonies and, of course, a solo banjo part.

Miles does not believe any of this would have been possible, however, had he not spent so many years transcribing and otherwise coming to terms with music of Bach. The banjoist's efforts in that repertoire, documented on the recording "American Bach," drew wide admiration, with no less than cellist Janos Starker in 1997 expressing to me his admiration of Miles' achievement.

"It is a remarkable feat," Starker said. "My first reaction to his playing was a smile, and then amazement at how far the man has gotten with it. I have admiration for him, because he is enhancing the possibilities of an instrument that is not known for approaching classical music."

"Camerado Suite" spans several musical languages, including classical, jazz and folk. DeGrandis arranged it so that it would be challenging but not insurmountable for musically accomplished students, such as those from Niles North. Miles, who draws upon the "clawhammer" style of banjo playing (which involves brushing downward on the strings, rather than plucking upward in the manner of bluegrass musicians) finds the part he wrote for himself to be taxing.

"It's pretty difficult, in that I have to have everything memorized," he says. "I can't read (the score) and play at the same time, because there's too much jumping around to do."

Add to his nimble banjo playing the words of Whitman and an unmistakable jazz sensibility, and you have a singular musical statement.

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