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Siegel unearths treasures with Chamber Blues

By Michael Parrish
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Since the Siegel-Schwall Band recorded its landmark album "Three Pieces for Blues Band and Symphony Orchestra" with the San Francisco Symphony in 1971, Corky Siegel has been the world's leading (and only) blues-classical harmonica player-pianist. For the last decade, he has fronted Chamber Blues, a genre-bending ensemble that also includes a world-class string quartet and versatile hand percussionist Frank Donaldson.

Performing Friday night at the Chicago Folk Center, Chamber Blues was in top form, blending blues and Western and Indian classical music into a distinctive artistic stew. The neatly trimmed, vested and bespectacled Siegel looked more like a professor than a bluesman as he led the group into "Filisko's Dream," a playful composition built around a style of note bending he learned from Old Town School harmonica instructor Joe Filisko. The tune was the first of many studies in textural contrasts, as the string section faithfully mimicked the harmonica's swoops, and Donaldson, sitting cross-legged at center stage, kept time with his tabla.

The centerpiece of the first set was Siegel's "Aunt Lila's Suite," comprising four compositions he penned thanks to a Lila Wallace/Reader's fellowship. The first section, Opus 13, began with cellist Jill Kaeding cranking out a boogie-woogie bass line on her cello while violist Richard Halajian offered more uptown ornamentations. As Siegel swung into uptempo barrelhouse piano, Donaldson started scratching out rhythm on a washboard, while violinists Rebecca McFaul and Guillaume Combet alternated between playing flowing melody lines and injecting pizzicato accents.

In Opus 16, Siegel played a slow 12-bar blues on his electric piano, accented by some slow, soulful bowed cello lines from Kaeding. Opus 17 was an uptempo shuffle that featured Combet, playing lightning fast notes all around the piece's irresistible beat.

Music review

Halajian's slow, moody "Pizzicato Blue" was one of the few pieces the group performed that took full advantage of the range of expression inherent the string quartet. He began by plucking a folky melody on his viola while the other players played a pastoral tune that gradually increased in harmonic and rhythmic complexity.

Siegel premiered a rearranged version of one of his older tunes, "Goodbye California," that featured him and McFaul in a soulful vocal duet, and a stirring viola solo by Halajian. The set ended with Opus 8, a majestic piece that again allowed the string players to weave their magic while Siegel blew a couple of marathon harmonica solos, one while on his back with one leg up in the air.

In Chamber Blues, Siegel has assembled a wonderfully talented group of players who have the

versatility, listening skills and senses of humor necessary to execute his sometimes quirky, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, but always joyful and intriguing, musical hybrids.

Based on the strength of the new pieces played Friday night, the group, one of Chicago's musical treasures, has considerable upside potential for mining hitherto unexplored territory.

"One of Chicago's musical treasures"

Soulful ... Majestic ... Joyful ...
Intriguing ... Irresistible