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'Bowfire' members display broad range of string talents

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Instead of getting into the whole "which came first" notion — re: the violin or the fiddle — let's just agree that, for all practical purposes, the two are essentially one. Perhaps that's one of the concepts that Lenny Solomon thought about before he refined that notion and shaped what would become "Bowfire" — the show.

In any event, the whole "Bowfire" project is a well-thought-out and well-performed stage extravaganza featuring a backup rhythm section and (counting Solomon) eight violinist-fiddlers playing licks with roots in jazz, classical, bluegrass and Celtic idioms. This focus on one specific instrument and how diverse musical traditions can adapt to that instrument help differentiate "Bowfire" from standard concert fare.

To be more accurate, the key element in "Bowfire" is the bow, an implement that is traditionally used to coax music from the violin/fiddle, the cello and the erhu (a bowed Chinese zither with two strings), all of which were part of the ensemble's instrumental mix.

George Gao, the erhu player, and Wendy Solomon, the cellist, both had impressive moments in the solo spotlight with Solomon acting as the putative love interest of all the male string players in one segment and Gao demonstrating time and time again an amazing ability to make his instrument, even though pitched a shade differently than his ensemble mates, blend in with the other strings.



But make no mistake, the violin/ fiddle players were at the heart of the show. All of them were virtuosi in one sense or another. Solomon and Stephane Allard were adept at playing jazz riffs and country swing licks, while Ray Legere (who also played mandolin) had the bluegrass patterns deeply ingrained in his muscle memory. Solomon, Allard, Kelli Trottier and Bogdan Djukic also had the classical music chops to make "Father Fugue" and Solomon's arrangement of Pablo Sarasate's "Ziguenerweisen" convincing.

The real hits, though, came from the Celtic-influenced musicians, Trottier, Shane Cook and April Verch. Trottier sang a few tunes, in addition to playing her instrument and along with Verch did some quick step-dancing moves. Verch was particularly talented in this regard, playing like a dervish while moving her feet in a blur and tapping out rhythms with an alacrity that "verged" on the miraculous. She also got the single biggest moment of applause.



Members of the ensemble Bowfire perform Tuesday night in the Center for the Arts on the University at Buffalo North Campus in Amherst. Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News