

Review: Nexus a big hit with Beethoven crowd

By Terry Rindfleisch

WINONA, Minn. -- It was quite a **different - and extraordinary - night of entertainment** Tuesday at the Minnesota Beethoven Festival in Winona.

There were no strings, no piano, no Mozart and not even Beethoven.

The concert was all percussion, but **not just any percussion ensemble. It was the Toronto-based Nexus Percussion Ensemble that thrilled the crowd** in St. Cecilia Theatre at Cotter High School.

Nexus received a standing ovation and charmed the audience with ragtime and waltz encores. Audience members weren't sure what kind of performance they would see, but **they were transported to new places with the skill and talent of this group. Nexus does amazing things with so many different percussion instruments.**

The five-member ensemble performed contemporary percussion music written by percussionists, and the bright colors of different sounds and instruments filled the theater. **The crowd knew it was going to experience something unique** when Nexus opened with music for pieces of wood as the group played rhythmic patterns along with a steady beat on tuned pairs of large wooden dowels called claves.

The ensemble featured two John Cage compositions, including party-like dance music using unusual instruments such as the squawker, ratchet, slide whistle, cowbells and ratchet. The whimsical instrumentation brought chuckles from the audience.

Nexus performed two African percussion pieces, and the star instrument in the Zimbabwe number was the African mbira, a plucked idiophone sometimes called a thumb piano. In the Ghana piece, several native instruments were highlighted including the iron bell Gankogui and the gourd rattle Axatse. **The group's interpretation of the two African pieces was phenomenal** and added cultural variety to the show.

Nexus concluded the program with a crowd favorite, "The Invisible Proverb," written by Russell Hartenberger, a Nexus member. The ensemble performed the piece on marimba and xylophone, displaying stunning rhythm patterns from West Africa with **gorgeous melodies.**

In the end, Nexus was a cool addition to the festival, and the crowd will never look at a percussion section in the same way.