Versatile bassoons

CLASSICAL REVIEW

The Caliban Quartet

At Heliconian Hall on Sunday

Reviewed by Elissa Poole

MENTION a bassoon quartet, especially when its name rhymes with lunatic, and most people will chuckle. But when the Bassoonatics want to drop their buffo image and be taken seriously, they go by the name of the Caliban Quartet, and play music by composers such as Sibelius, Brahms and Prokofiev.

Their concert on Sunday was far from an evening of heavy classics, since titles like *Waltz, Tango* and *Scherzo* made up a good part of the program, and engaging introductions to the pieces kept the audience primed for entertainment. But the first-rate technique, musicality and inventive programming of this Toronto-based group — bassoonists Fraser Jackson, Nadina Jackson, Kathleen McLean and Michael Sweeney — kept the chuckles between numbers and the musical expectations on a higher plane.

Just as Shakespeare's Caliban couldn't escape his earthy, uncouth self, the Caliban Quartet can't escape the fact that it is an oddity among ensembles, with very little legitimate repertoire of its own. Of Sunday's program, only Prokofiev's early *Humorous Scherzo, Op. 12*, played with a zingy "so there!" kind of wit, and Michael Welsh's 1995 nothing-special *Tango* were intended for four bassoons. The other works were arrangements, primarily by Sweeney and Jackson, including Brahms' *Eight Waltzes*, originally for piano four-hands; Astor Piazzola's upstart *Tango* for guitar duo; and George Gershwin's *Three Preludes* for solo piano.

Among the most successful arrangements was a pair of 16th-century pieces — a vocal motet by Palestrina, performed somewhat too briskly to be as special as it could have been, and an anonymous Flemish madrigal, both of which underscored the bassoon's affinity with the human voice.

Catchy arrangements of Gershwin's jazz-inspired *Preludes* temporarily turned the quartet into a sax section, while closing works by Stravinsky and Piazzola, which explored the tango's mystique, were played with verve and versatility.

The Caliban Quartet has experimented with jazz elements and even a Tom Waits imitator in its earlier, lighter-weight incarnations. Its next step, like many other unorthodox ensembles, is commissioning new music. It will be interesting to see what they come up with in their all-new music program at the Music Gallery next fall.