Sax quartet gives beautiful Rinker concert

By Ken Keaton

The Rinker Playhouse Young Artists Series remains one of the great artistic bargains in Palm Beach. For a ticket, you can catch performers at the start of promising careers. The results, more often than not, are impressive.

Such was the case Monday night with The Donald Sinta Quartet. Donald Sinta is a legendary professor of saxophone at the University of Michigan, and these are all his protégés, Dan Graser on soprano, Zach Stern on alto, Joe Girard on tenor and Danny Hawthorne-Foss on baritone.

The members spoke to the audience between numbers, and quickly determined that about 90 percent of the crowd had never heard a saxophone quartet before. They were in for a treat.

The Sinta plays with astonishing virtuosity, subtly beautiful phrasing and exquisite ensemble no matter how rhythmically complex the music is. The opening piece, David Kechley’s Rush demonstrated that virtuosity; Graser joked that the Kravis had a “minimum number of notes” policy, and they wanted to cover it in the first piece.

Antonin Dvořák’s American String Quartet followed. The arrangement didn’t really work; perhaps the sound of the strings is so embedded in the musical memory that it could not be satisfactory in any new guise. Still, it’s impossible not to like Dvořák, and the performance brought many pleasures.

Gregory Wanamaker’s Elegy, a tribute to the victims of 9/11, was the highlight of the first half. It is an achingly beautiful work, with harmonic tensions resolving like a high Renaissance motet.

Tango Virtuoso by French composer Thierry Escaich, was a lighter conclusion with lots of tango fun.

The second half began with another transcription, of Edvard Grieg’s Holberg Suite. This was originally for piano but is equally popular in Grieg’s arrangement for strings, and it worked magnificently for a saxophone quartet. The Sinta’s blend of voices was subtly beautiful, and the gavotte was an utter delight.

Minimalist Michael Nyman is best known for his film scores, and the Sinta presented a suite of his works, including two pieces from The Piano, and a third movement, Song for Tony, a tribute to Nyman’s manager Tony Simmons. That last piece was uncommonly beautiful but contained the only technical quibble of the concert — Stern’s lovely alto solo was covered up by the other three players.

The closing piece, Zach Browning’s Howler Back is a one-minute piece that incorporates classical, jazz, and funk (if funk players could negotiate its constant meter changes). The audience’s response was a standing ovation that demanded an encore, another of Wanamaker’s one-minute fusions, Speed Metal Organum Blues, described as a medieval monk tripping on acid while listening to blues — a surprisingly accurate description for the ultimate encore.