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Avoiding ‘Moderato’ Becomes a Style

By STEVE SMITH

The composer Christopher Rouse, in an onstage conversation during a concert of his works presented at Zankel Hall on Friday evening, described one of the primary urges in his music with a striking line: “Anything worth doing is worth doing to excess.” He credited the saying to Mark Twain, though evidence points to [Edwin H. Land](#), the inventor of Polaroid instant photography. (Famous quotations, like small children, are irresistible to bring up in conversation and nearly impossible to pin down.)

Regardless, Mr. Rouse’s point was on the money. Responding to what he described as “the moderato, mezzo forte syndrome — everything was kind of not too fast, not too slow, not too loud, not too soft,” he developed a style marked by infectious vitality, abundant energy and dynamic extremes. Diverse as the four works presented during this Making Music program were, each demonstrated those signature traits.

Missing from the portrait was Mr. Rouse’s orchestral music, a fundamental part of what has made him one of America’s most prominent composers. (The premiere of his Symphony No. 3 will be presented by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in St. Louis on May 5 and streamed live on [the St. Louis Public Radio Web site](#) on May 7.) But the program introduced to New York Mr. Rouse’s String Quartet No. 3 (2009) as played by the Calder Quartet, which partly commissioned the piece and gave its premiere in New Haven last June.

From a melancholy opening filled with swooping glissandos, the 20-minute string quartet emphasizes group virtuosity with jagged bursts of notes deployed in rhythmic unison, mostly at high velocity. Likened by Mr. Rouse in a program note to a grand mal seizure and uneasy even in repose, the piece is unsparing in its demands for pinpoint accuracy, sudden dynamic contrasts and clear articulation. The Calder players met all of its challenges easily in an exacting account.

The program opened with “[Ku-Ka-Ilimoku](#)” (1978), a brisk, visceral percussion quartet inspired by traditional Hawaiian music. Three Calder members participated in a superb rendition of “[Rotae Passionis](#)” (1983), a bracing evocation by nine instrumentalists of the

betrayal, Crucifixion and entombment of Jesus. The clarinetist Todd Palmer was penetrating in the work's pensive introduction and conclusion.

"Compline" (1996), for flute, clarinet, harp and string quartet, opens with woodwinds flitting freely over a driving string ostinato and ends in variegated repose. Its inclusion was well timed: however exhilarating the preceding intensity and tumult had been, this celebratory music offered a welcome respite.