

San Diego Arts

Calder Quartet at UC San Diego's Mandeville Auditorium

Less Really Is More

By Kenneth Herman

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Kenneth Herman

Specialization, that summum bonum of the last century, caught up with the institution of the classical string quartet in the 1970s. Here in North America, the Kronos Quartet formed in 1973 to devote itself exclusively to contemporary music, a decision soon echoed in Great Britain by the newly formed Arditti Quartet. In the next decade, the Turtle Island String Quartet would align itself with jazz, and a mere ten years ago, the quartet Ethel dedicated its efforts to playing contemporary music with electronic components.

Southern California's own Calder Quartet has fostered strong connections with contemporary composers Christopher Rouse, Thomas Adès and Terry Riley, as well as a number of younger composers featured with Calder at the annual Carlsbad Music Festival. But Calder is not into specialization—they claim the whole landscape of chamber music from Haydn to the commission arriving in tomorrow's Fed-Ex box. And I do not know another string quartet that commands this territory with the authority and finesse of the Calder Quartet.

This week they returned to UC San Diego for a pair of contrasting concerts, and I was fortunate to be able to attend Friday's (April 24) program of more traditional offerings at Mandeville Auditorium. They opened their program with Bartók's thorny, single-movement Third String Quartet, but having completed this 15-minute modernist gem, Calder turned all of its mighty attention to Mozart's C Major, K. 465 "Dissonant" Quartet and Beethoven's First Rasumovsky Quartet, Op. 59, No. 1.

Having heard this ensemble perform since they were graduate students, I am mildly surprised at the direction they have taken. From the get-go, this was a powerful ensemble, whose energetic and insightful playing converted even listeners with the most transient interest in classical chamber music. What was evident in this concert was a refinement, an almost minimalist paring back of dynamic levels and a daring expansion of time between phrases, more in the

Mozart of course, that demanded much more of the audience in terms of listening. In a culture where improvement always means more, Calder is brave enough to say less is more. Anyone who has observed the progression of sculptor Alexander Calder's work knows the congruence of this aesthetic.

The good news is that all of the Calder Quartet's youthful zeal still underpins their performance. But unlike their contemporaries in the pop music field, they want their listeners to enter their sonic world, not catapult their sound mass into your sadly unprotected aural space. Not surprisingly, this was one of the most quiet and attentive Mandeville audiences I have experienced in some time.

During Mozart's tender *Andante Cantabile*, Calder's sound hovered miraculously above the stage like a plume of incense around the a Greek Orthodox altar during the divine mysteries. When a quartet plays as keenly in tune as this one does, they can risk quiet dynamics: none of the seams will show.

Some quartets make a fuss about playing a matched set of instruments made by the same builder, and there can be some merit in this argument. In Calder's case, however, their blend, their balance of sound comes from cultivating a similar string technique. These musicians all studied together—and began playing together—as undergraduates, and I hear in their ensemble a greater integration, a more exacting similarity of attack, the focus of each pizzicato, that is not as evident in other ensembles.

Calder's Beethoven displayed a sweet, optimistic color and flow that in no way discounted the depth of the writing. The musicians apparently enjoyed the jocular banter of the Scherzo, using just enough muscle to pull it off without making Beethoven heavy-handed. Their traversal of the wandering, almost Schubertian *Adagio* was absolutely sure-footed. No detail was overlooked and every foray from the path revealed new rewards. In the final movement, they reveled in all of the rhetorical flourishes that the composer lavished on the "assigned" Russian theme of the quartet's commissioner, Count Razumovsky.

When violinists Ben Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook played a sequence of parallel intervals in the Beethoven *Adagio*, the shimmer of their perfectly matched voices was ethereal, and Bulbrook's lithe, rapid figurations in the *Allegro* maintained an even, uncanny purity of execution. Eric Byers' cello is consistently strong without being overly assertive; I like the way he eschews the heavy vibrato that many string quartet cellists cannot resist when they eye a chance to steal the spotlight. Violist Jonathan Moerschel's elegant sonority effortlessly binds the group together.

San Diegans have more chances to hear Calder: they will appear on the second program of this August's SummerFest, the annual festival of the La Jolla Music Society, and they will be featured in the Carlsbad Music Festival in late September.