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Calder Quartet, Terry Riley to play Blum & Poe gallery

The young players (and their mentor) perform to raise money so they can commission new works.

By Margaret Wappler, Los Angeles Times

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Los Angeles is teeming with places to perform if you're a rock band stoking dreams of becoming the next Arcade Fire, but what about a classically trained string quartet, one that can play with party guru Andrew WK or the National's stormy rock? The art world, ready to foster the kind of cross-pollination that sparked between Merce Cunningham and John Cage, is ready to receive you with open arms.

It's a good thing, too, in a city where genre-jumping musicians have few mid-level-sized homes. Either play in the splendor of Walt Disney Concert Hall or the tiny confines of the Smell or Pehrspace. Or, in the case of local heroes Calder Quartet, talk to Tim Blum, co-owner of Culver City's prestigious Blum & Poe gallery.

On Wednesday, the Calder Quartet will perform, followed by a piano set from their mentor Terry Riley, at an event designed to raise money for the group to commission new pieces. Hosted in Blum & Poe's new space partially conceived for interdisciplinary works, it's the kind of show that feels auspicious for its connective tissue between the art world and classical music that expands tradition to incorporate forays into rock, jazz, Indian raga or whatever catches the roaming ear.

Among other Riley compositions, the Calders will perform "Cadenza on the Night Plain," one of Riley's most famous compositions, first recorded by his frequent collaborators the Kronos Quartet.

For Blum, it's an ideal fulfillment of the space opened a year and a half ago.

"I'm more than happy to fill any kind of void that's out there," he said, echoing a sentiment shared by Highland Park's Public Fiction, Chinatown's Human Resources and other galleries eager to support

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music drawn outside the prosaic lines. "The thing about a private gallery is that we're flexible, there's not a bureaucratic nature to it. You can just decide to do something."

The seeds for Wednesday's event were sown in 2006 at the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Minimalist Jukebox festival when Calder Quartet performed some of Riley's works written while he was a student at UC Berkeley in the early '60s, before his 1964 breakthrough composition, "In C," helped launch the Minimalist movement. After not hearing his student works for more than 40 years, Riley listened to the Calder Quartet perform them and had a change of heart.

"When I heard the Calders play it, I thought, 'I really like this,'" Riley said from his home near Sacramento. "I had dismissed them as student works but then I thought that maybe I should've pursued that direction more."

Speaking about one of the pieces for string trio, Riley said, "The Calders play it with great bristling energy ... they really are wonderful players who go into music deeply."

For the Calders, it was a rare opportunity to give light to a corner of Riley's legacy not often explored. "We felt like we'd reunited Terry with an old friend or a child he never sees," violinist Andrew Bulbrook said.

For Riley's 75th birthday, the Calder Quartet, which also includes violinist Ben Jacobson, violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers, recorded the two compositions. With jacket artwork by Dave Muller, a limited batch of 75 pressed vinyl records will be available for purchase with a VIP ticket on Wednesday.

Attendees will be able to hear the record in a special sound chamber designed by Muller, who will also DJ at the event. Decorated with his drawings, Muller wanted to create an insular space. "It's inspired by Riley's description of the pieces as sound shapes floating together," Muller said. "It's a place where music can transport you."

Copies of the scores will also be available to take home but the notes are not written in stone. Bulbrook remembers the biggest lesson from when the Calders studied with Riley directly a few years ago. "One of the coolest things he taught us was escaping the tyranny of the written note," Bulbrook said. "There are no mistakes, there are only new roads."

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