

REVIEW: Calder Quartet precisely right at Rockport Chamber Music Festival

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Rockport — Subtle decisions go into the making of a great chamber music program. Especially an evening that features new music.

Performers often “soften the blow” of presenting contemporary works, sliding them into programs that include beloved chestnuts from the masters. The result is invariably the same: audiences will say, “I loved that Beethoven (or Schubert, or Brahms), but that (insert living composer’s name) wasn’t for me.”

But when new works are carefully matched with older works that also challenge audiences, the results can be magic. Like Thursday evening’s performance at the Shalin Liu Performance Center by the stellar Calder Quartet, who sandwiched pieces by two living composers, Thomas Adès and Andrew Norman, between Mozart (“Dissonance”) and Mendelssohn (his final work for quartet, the F minor, Opus 80).

They began with Mozart’s No. 19, K. 465, nicknamed “Dissonance” for the untethered opening. The dissonance only lasts a minute, while each member explores a different “wrong” key, before settling into happy C major, but the nickname has stuck, mainly because it unsettled audiences in Mozart’s time.

Now the opening seems just a brief diversion from sublime Mozart, full of clever explorations for each instrument. This performance, as was all the playing this evening, was characterized by precise intonation and overall unity of sound. A great quartet exploring great music makes it all sound like everything flows organically from one idea to the next; this was like that.

Adès’ “Arcadiana,” an early work from the British composer, followed. Second violinist Andrew Bulbrook spoke before the piece about the Calder’s long association with Adès, and the performance that followed showed the group’s familiarity with this thorny but rewarding work. In seven brief movements, all inspired by other works of art or literature, Adès paints a modernist, dark view of heaven (Arcadia), with only the next to last movement, a lush lyrical interlude, breaking up the tension. The finale drifts off on a single note in each instrument, overlapping. The work was stark, intense, and beautifully played.

As was Andrew Norman’s “...Toward Sunrise and the Prime of Light,” which grew dramatically in its brief five minutes from quiet thoughtfulness to frenzied ensemble playing. In lesser hands such an abrupt transition would be jarring; Calder made it seem natural, almost inviting.

They ended the evening with Mendelssohn’s final quartet, the F minor. Again, the careful attention to tone stood out. Many players, understandably, sacrifice a pure and clear sound in the heat of the moment, caught up in the music’s intensity. Calder — especially in the first movement, and most notably exemplified by their extraordinary first violinist Benjamin Jacobson — sacrificed nothing. The

fire was there, and so was the clarity.

As an encore, they offered the pizzicato movement of the Ravel quartet, another substantial, and solidly played, musical excursion.

Calder performs again on Saturday evening, playing a program of Ben Johnston, Beethoven and Brahms.

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