

MUSIC REVIEW

Hidden dimensions from the Calder Quartet

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 23, 2013

ROCKPORT — Bartok's Fifth String Quartet presents as complete a picture of the composer as any of his mature works. It begins with a series of repeated notes that the string players hammer out in a stabbing, irregular rhythm. Most ensembles playing this piece come out all guns blazing, accentuating the forward-looking nature of Bartok's language.

When the Calder Quartet, one of America's great young string quartets, played the Fifth on Thursday at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival, they took a decidedly different approach. Those repeated notes emerged slowly and almost gently. In the rest of the movement, they emphasized Bartok's textures, playing with a balance of warmth and clarity that is one of the Calder's greatest assets. Still, it was an unusual gambit, and you wondered why they opted for it.

The answer was revealed later in the piece. The Calder saved its fire for the last two of the quartet's five movements. The fourth is one of Bartok's great specimens of night music — eerily atmospheric and full of previously unimagined string timbres, and it grows to feverish intensity. In the last movement they drew out Bartok's sense of humor better than any group I've heard — it sounded like a series of woozy hide-and-seek games with the listener.

But neither movement would have made the same impact without the Calder's initial restraint, and that's what made Thursday's performance so valuable. Performances like these — freshly rethought, impeccably played — do more than provide enjoyable listening. They reveal hidden dimensions, renew a bond with the composer, and justify

the continuance of familiar works in the repertory.

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The concert was also well programmed, opening with Esa-Pekka Salonen’s “Homunculus,” a compact piece whose dense harmonies were leavened by a light sense of rhythm and a surfeit of intricate, atonal melodies. Echoes of Bartok were audible throughout.

The closer was the Ravel quartet. Less revelatory than the Bartok, the performance was nevertheless beautifully played, again with largely slow tempos, lush sound, and a precise ear for textural gradation. At a few moments the Calder seemed almost to be deconstructing the piece, examining each of its component parts anew.

For an encore, the quartet dispensed with the traditional and played an excerpt of a piece by British composer Joby Talbot, which the Calder premiered only two weeks ago. It was tonal music of striking breadth and sonority. But even more notable was the presence of new music in this largely ceremonial spot. It was a brilliant idea; other groups should follow the lead.

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Rockport Chamber Music Festival

Shalin Liu Performance Center, Rockport

Also performing: The Calder Quartet

Date of concert: Thursday