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A weekend flock of L.A. string quartets



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October 16, 2014, 3:54 p.m.

Los Angeles isn't known for its string quartets. How strange is that?

This weekend, three excellent and very different local string quartets play in three very different kinds of venues. They play different kinds of music, although Schubert has a way of popping up. Local composers are not neglected.

In fact, L.A. and its environs have a history of fostering striking string quartets. The Hollywood String Quartet, a legend in chamber music, was the product of Hollywood studio musicians in the 1950s. And among the ensemble's famed recordings are classic accounts of Schubert's sumptuous C-Major String Quintet and dramatic 14thString Quartet ("Death and the Maiden"), both of which happen to be among this weekend's offerings.

We have also been home to the likes of the Sequoia String Quartet and Los Angeles String Quartet. Neither still exist, but the current Pacific Quartet got its start here and so did the three quartets appearing this weekend.

Friday night, the Formalist Quartet, which concentrates on advanced new music, will be found at the hip downtown space ArtShare L.A., playing contemporary works by Nicholas Deyoe and Christian Wolff as well as being joined by cellist Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick in the Schubert Quintet.

Saturday night, it is the turn of the Lyris Quartet, which opens the Santa Monica new music series Jacaranda at First Presbyterian Church with two 20th century classics, the string quartets of Leos Janáček. The first takes its inspiration from Tolstoy's story "The Kreutzer

Sonata." Tolstoy took his inspiration from Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9 ("Kreutzer"). That sonata will be performed by violinist Nokuthula Ngwenyama and pianist Steven Vanhauwaert, who also plays Janáček's "In the Mists."

Finally, Sunday afternoon, the Calder Quartet, formed by students at USC, begins a two-year residency at the Broad Stage, also in Santa Monica. Unlike the Formalists and Lyris, which are mainly known locally, the Calder is a full-time ensemble, and its international prominence grows every year, as does its impressive mastery.

The Calder is also distinguished by a non-specialized repertory that is a uniquely luxurious mix of classical masterpieces, avant-garde new music and pop. Sunday's program is comprised of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, which helped usher in atonal music a century ago; German composer Jörg Widmann's recent Third Quartet ("The Hunt"), an update on Haydn and Schumann; and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden." The impressive young soprano, Yulia Van Doren, is the soloist in Schoenberg's quartet.

By the way, the Calders will also take on the Schubert Quintet in April at another of its Broad Stage concerts. But the Calders are hardly a Hollywood String Quartet looking for an outlet away from film music. Another of the Calder programs at the Broad Stage will be a concert of works by Bear McCreary, winner of an Emmy for his music for the "Battlestar Galatica" television series and a classmate of the quartet at USC.

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