

Calder Quartet series at Transformer Station gets off to auspicious start (review)

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No longer is it too early to call: The next two years are going to be brilliant.

The Calder Quartet appeared Wednesday at the Transformer Station in Cleveland. It was the first of several such concerts on the Cleveland Museum of Art's Performing Arts Series this and next year.

Autumn de Wilde

Following Wednesday's performance by the Calder Quartet at the Transformer Station, it's safe to say Cleveland Museum of Art patrons have cause to rejoice in the residency keeping the group around the region through 2016.

Programs like *that* – the first of several afforded by the group's ongoing residency at the Oberlin Conservatory – are simply too rare. Would that more ensembles had what it takes to present 20th-century music in such a concentrated, illuminating, and bold manner.

By way of introduction, the Los Angeles-based Calders commenced with an American showpiece: Ben Johnston's 1973 String Quartet No. 4, a grand set of variations on "Amazing Grace."

Following a rapturous, slightly twisted statement of the theme, the players embarked on a whirlwind exploration of the tune's harmonic and rhythmic potential as dense as some masterwork of Renaissance polyphony. Familiar fragments passed like sights from inside a speeding car as microtones flew and the music wove in and out of focus.

A different sort of structure lent order to the second piece on the program, "Korrespondenz," by conductor Peter Eotvos. Here, the quartet played out musical versions of the letters between Mozart and his father, around the time of the composer's move to Paris.

One needn't have read the letters to grasp that dad disapproved. So combative was the quartet's playing, so complete their mastery of alternative string techniques, the uneasy nature of the relationship was obvious.

At best, in the Calders' fascinating performance, the two achieved a kind of icy *détente*. At worst, they veritably sparred, trading jabs and daggers and confronting each other with desperate, mad glissandos. Only upon the death of Mozart's mother did father and son cease bickering and mourn as one.

Bartok's String Quartet No. 6 made for a compelling conclusion. Many quartets, the Calders included, are able to convey the score's darker sides. Its sadness, its terror, its reflections of world on the brink of war. The Calders, though, also unearthed its folk roots, bringing out the peasant melodies and animated dances most groups leave buried.

The result was a performance of uncommon breadth. Devastation and liveliness, anguish and radiance intermingled as never before, and the effect was both disturbing and potent. More in this vein will be most welcome.

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