

MUSIC REVIEW

Youthful energy guides Calder Quartet's effort



AUTUMN DE WILDE

A composer doesn't have to be young to portray the ephemeral as ecstatic, but it probably helps. That was one possible conclusion to be drawn from the Calder Quartet's Friday concert at Jordan Hall, featuring three youthful works fueled by fluidity — and one midlife crisis tempestuously brooding on it.

Andrew Norman's "Sabina," dating from 2006, was inspired by the proliferating play of sunlight in an Italian church at dawn. (In its original string-trio guise, the piece became the finale of Norman's 2010 "A Companion's Guide to Rome.") A long, rising melody wends through slow-rolling harmonies rendered as an increasingly busy Brownian motion of bowing across and along the strings — metallic scrapes near the bridge, dulcet chirps over the fingerboard — reaching a luminous, fleeting frenzy.

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Norman's piece was a scintillation of sound; Thomas Adés's 1994 "Arcadiana" was one of ideas. The subjects of its seven movements are nominally elegiac — vanished or imaginary idylls, evocations of water at its most mutable — but the music seethes with invention. The exuberance is both ingenious and acidic, citing references with equal parts loving precision (a conjured English countryside practically reincarnates Edward Elgar) and biting wit. Adés's furious imagination ultimately produces as much invigoration as introspection.

In between came more quicksilver: Maurice Ravel's 1904 String Quartet, the Belle Époque motion-blurred into a whirlwind of intricate propriety. All three performances were showcases for the group, which has a longstanding association with Adés, a lengthy résumé of new-music advocacy, and a profusion of refined flair. The players — violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violist Jonathan Moerschel, cellist Eric Byers — are unusually well-matched in tone and temperament: their sound is almost invariably elegant, even restrained, their energy channeled into a honed sense of momentum and motion. (Bulbrook and Moerschel are also alumni of the NEC Preparatory School, prompting some extra hometown audience enthusiasm.)

Norman, Adés, and Ravel wrote their quartets in their 20s; Ludwig van Beethoven was

staring down 40 (and rueing another failed marriage prospect) when he wrote his Op. 95 Quartet in F minor. Maybe that's why the music's furious coursing constantly seizes on possible anchors: hammered accents, halting rests, a fugue's deliberate ritual. The players made emphases weighty and solid, and gave pauses extra braking distance; but, in the suddenly brilliant end, the virtuosic drive of Beethoven and the group prevailed. It felt like an acknowledgement of how music improves on life: both fly away, but the music can always be played again.

Matthew Guerrieri can be reached at matthewguerrieri@gmail.com.

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