



MUSIC

Review: The Jack and the Calder Quartet in Concert

By ZACHARY WOOLFE FEB. 25, 2015

Georg Friedrich Haas’s newest string quartet, his eighth, had its first American performance on Tuesday evening at the Miller Theater at Columbia University. And its second, too.

After the Jack Quartet played the work through, Mr. Haas spoke briefly, and then the group performed it again. New music often struggles to get further hearings after a premiere, but by the end of an hourlong concert, this 22-minute piece had begun truly to work its way into a listener’s bloodstream.

Its impact was made not just by the repetition, but also by the strength of Mr. Haas’s musical language. He has long explored microtones — the many tones that lie between two adjacent keys, say, on a piano — and the String Quartet No. 8 (2014) uses them virtuosically, sliding between extremely close-by notes with an effect that’s sometimes ominous and sometimes strangely peaceful.

In a remarkable performance, the Jack Quartet managed to sound free while maintaining control in a central passage of hovering harmonies, built from the overtones of a base microtone. While a finger misplaced by a millimeter could cause these “sensitive” chords, as Mr. Haas called them, to fall apart, here they had the delicate precision of blown glass.

The piece’s final section is dominated by a rhythm that on first listen seemed like the relentless, soft ba-buh of a heartbeat. But Mr. Haas said that he had been inspired — exactly how, it was difficult to make out — by the metric stresses of a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843), an explanation that suddenly transformed the work into a means of summoning, and playing with, the past.

In this, it has something in common with Thomas Adès’s “Arcadiana” (1994), played on Sunday afternoon by the energetic, focused Calder Quartet at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Library. That work’s seven short movements conjure up, like memory itself, fragmented yet powerful visions of a world that’s

vanished.

The first section, “Venezia notturno,” opens with glassy, slippery sounds that evoke Venice’s canals; the different layers assigned each player seem wholly separate until they unexpectedly converge into moments of rich, unison melody. “O Albion,” near the end, is a warm, enveloping hymn that would be simply retro if not for the tinge of dissonance amid its melting poignancy, which gradually recedes into the faintness of the final movement, “Lethe.”

The composer Andrew Norman — at 35, he’s eight years Mr. Adès’s junior — is a fan of Mr. Adès, and his influence is palpable in Mr. Norman’s “Sabina” (2008-9), with which the Calder Quartet opened its concert, and its capacious energy and elegant cramming in of every possible texture and color.

Yet “Sabina” has a mood all its own, a hazy atmosphere that builds, by way of fiddling bow crossings, into teeming triumph before ending with a wispy elegy. The group cannily followed it and “Arcadiana” with Ravel’s fiery String Quartet in F. In this brash yet poised performance, Ravel (1875-1937) seemed less like Mr. Adès and Mr. Norman’s great-great-grandfather than like their older brother.

Correction: March 2, 2015

An earlier version of this article included a misattributed quote. It was the Calder violinist Andrew Bulbrook who called “Arcadiana” “the greatest string quartet composed in the last 50 years.” It was not the composer Andrew Norman, though he is a fan of Mr. Adès.

A version of this review appears in print on February 26, 2015, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Energy and Repetition at Play.