Crossover Quintet

The string quartet Sybarite5 plays what turns out to be the final Cliburn Sessions at the soon-to-close Live Oak Music Hall and Lounge.

By J Robin Coffelt, March 12, 2017

Fort Worth — For the past few seasons, The Cliburn has presented a couple of shows a year at The Live Oak Music Hall & Lounge. It has been great opportunity to hear crossover music in a casual, jazz-club-like atmosphere, in a series called the Cliburn Sessions. With this week’s announcement that The Live Oak will close at the end of April, however, this partnership comes to an end.

Thursday’s return engagement by Sybarite5, a string quintet, was thus the last of the Sessions concerts to be held at The Live Oak. Sybarite5, comprised of Sami Merdinian and Sarah Whitney, violins, Angela Pickett, viola, Laura Metcalf, cello, and Louis Levitt, bass, last visited Fort Worth, and The Live Oak, a bit over two years ago. On their return, there was considerable overlap with the repertoire they performed on their prior visit: Elgar’s Elegy, some Armenian folk songs, a Piazzolla tango, some Radiohead. (The ensemble has recorded an all-Radiohead album.)

As before, they announced all works from the stage, but posted a set list on their website (for which this critic is grateful). Highlights that were new to this year’s program included two winners of a composition contest in which composers wrote works specifically for Sybarite5. These included Steven Snowden’s “Traveler 65,” inspired by, as the quintet announced, “a chimpanzee in space.” (Presumably this is Ham, a chimp sent into space by NASA in 1961. He has his own Wikipedia page.) Snowden’s piece used a variety of extended techniques to replicate, evidently, the anxiety of Ham’s experience. These included lots of Bartók pizzicato, in which the strings are snapped, and mutes made from crumpled aluminum foil, which create a decidedly unpleasant hiss and pop.

Their other offering from the composition contest was Brandon Ridenour’s “NuPac Kanon & Gigue.” Imagine what would happen if Tupac Shakur arranged Pachelbel’s Canon in D for string quintet, and you pretty much have the idea—baroque meets beatbox.

Another success was their take on Dave Brubeck’s “Blue Rondo à la Turk,” which hewed remarkably closely to the iconic recording on Brubeck’s album Time Out, except, of course, for the instrumentation. Sybarite5 is a sort of millennial Kronos Quartet—a group that brings classical music to lovers of rock, and vice-versa. True story: I first heard the Kronos Quartet when I was an 18-year-old college student...
sophomore. They played their now-iconic cover of “Purple Haze” as an encore. I turned to my date and said, “Oooh, that was cool! What was that?” He looked at me, quietly stunned. That was my entrée into the world of late 1960s rock ‘n’ roll.

Sybarite5 chose a similar strategy for their encore, performing a brilliant string quintet version of A-ha’s 1984 song “Take On Me” that offered the inner voices—second violin and viola—much of the melodic material. I found myself wondering how many audience members Thursday night were as puzzled as I was by the Hendrix nearly 30 years ago, and how many, like me, could visualize the now-iconic video to A-ha’s song as they heard Sybarite5’s arrangement.

The members of this ensemble play at the highest levels technically and musically, and whose performances are so tightly woven they can seem choreographed. This is the exact sort of group that can serve as a gateway for millennials, and others, who may be concerned that classical music is stuffy or unfamiliar. And maybe, just maybe, they can get this Gen X-er to listen to some Radiohead, too, one of these days.