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Bracing Performance From a Young QuartetBy **Benjamin Frandzel**

Amazing young string quartets seem to appear at a steady pace these days, and it was a great pleasure on Sunday to see another one added to the local crop. The Afiara String Quartet, four Canadians who came together through various positions at the San Francisco Conservatory, emerged in their Sunday recital on the Noe Valley Chamber Music series as a terrifically unified, versatile, idiomatic, and moving ensemble.

Opening with an outstanding reading of Mozart's Quartet in D Major, K. 575, the quartet's members — Valerie Li and Yuri Cho, violin; David Samuel, viola; and Adrian Fung, cello — immediately demonstrated their shared virtues: a warm sound, an ability to bring out the music's architecture at a relaxed, natural pace, and an unflinching feel for each idiom they inhabited. The players' comfort and connection with each other brought out a genuine quality of intimacy among the instrumental voices and with the audience, heightened by the warm acoustic and small physical scale of Noe Valley Ministry. They also weren't afraid to let loose a bit as the Mozart progressed, bringing great energy to the concluding Allegretto while maintaining clarity and balance in the movement's involved counterpoint.

The quartet showed an equal degree of sympathy with Shostakovich's Seventh Quartet, in F-sharp minor, Op. 108. Though this comes right in the middle of his production of 15 quartets, it dates from 1960, later in the composer's life, and it dips into the sour mournfulness that inhabits much of his best music from this period.

The first movement introduces the repeating three-note motive that runs through all three movements, creating an increasingly obsessive atmosphere as it reappears. Its use in the opening movement establishes a strange mix of playfulness and menace, giving way to the pathos of the middle Lento. Shostakovich is often at his most eloquent when pushing instruments to their lower or upper registers, as was the case here, and the quartet's playing was just right for the movement's penetrating austerity.

The players brought out the drama of the final movement with great intensity, and were equal to the interpretive challenge of the movement, increasing the potent darkness of the music even as it quiets down, easing into stillness with an agitated, troubled spirit.

Playing With Pizzazz

Hearing the Afiara's high-energy take on John Zorn's 1988 work *Cat O' Nine Tails*, I thought of when I first heard the rapid-fire cut-and-paste approach that he employs in works like this. Around the time this piece and others like it appeared, I enjoyed his multistylistic aesthetic as an intriguing way to fit in all the music that a composer cares about without feeling any need to attempt a synthesis. Now this strategy seems to speak of the present moment more than ever, evoking our cultural short attention span and the information overload that afflicts everyday life.

In this case, the music alternates jarringly between extended instrumental techniques, salon music, square dances, cartoon music, dashes of other styles, and moments of brief, elegiac beauty. A lot of the music comes across comically, but the rapid shifts and multiple techniques are demanding, and the quartet brought it all off in a compelling fashion, conveying the disjointedness of Zorn's aesthetic while keeping the music's momentum strong. This is somewhat long at 15 minutes or so, but the quartet's energy kept it all engaging.

Along with its own merits, the presence of the Zorn piece on the program offered a chance for the past to interact with the present in an appealingly new way. In the wake of Zorn's channel-surfing aesthetic, the mercurial opening of Beethoven's Op. 95 in F minor, the "Serioso," seemed not at all like an orderly return to the past, but instead came across as all the more strange and hyperactive, wilder than the Zorn and without its self-consciousness. The players parlayed the energy derived from these frenetic moments into a performance of steady intensity and heightening excitement. The playing was fiery, but always in keeping with the quartet's already demonstrated sense of pacing and idiom.