Concert Review: PUBLIQuartet – ‘The New Baroque’ at the Met Cloisters

By Jon Sobel

PUBLIQuartet, the Metropolitan Museum’s 2016-17 Quartet in Residence, styled its Saturday concert at the Metropolitan Museum’s Cloisters “The New Baroque,” which sounds like a contradiction in terms. “Baroque” refers to a genre but also a time period – one long past. One might imagine a revival of early music forms by modern composers, or transcriptions of baroque pieces for unusual instruments. But PUBLIQuartet’s program was something much more interesting.

The adventurous quartet presented works that transform, adapt, and otherwise riff on music from the Baroque era (roughly 1600-1750), Johann Sebastian Bach in particular. Each half of the concert opened with world premieres of the ensemble’s own adaptations and transformations of well-known works by Bach. These creations heavily modernize and sometimes also romanticize Bach’s themes, “ornamenting them in our own way,” as violist Nick Revel explained. For example, the Adagio BMV 1001 for solo violin was expanded into a dizzying, even psychedelic piece for string quartet. Yet the underlying themes remained detectable.

The remarkable thing about these pieces is that they never sounded forced; the added layers and dimensions felt like natural evolutions. Not that Bach would have heard them as “natural,” but I really imagine that if given a chance he could have expanded his mind to appreciate them. I found them fascinating – enormously creative, always attention-grabbing, sometimes funny.

The four tremendously skilled musicians made good cases for two very recent works by young composers. Eugene Birman’s String Quartet (2012) plays with our expectations of harmonic resolution. It establishes a glassy, brittle atmosphere with surprising dissonances and literal, audible breaths that emphasize the way the way the four instruments breathe together as extensions of the musicians’ bodies.

The even newer “Extempore Anamnesis” by Jihyun Kim, who was in attendance, begins with hums as of swarming insects. This inventive work employs harmonics, sharp attacks, and other techniques to suggest bells, woodwinds, tympani, and woodblocks, and featured a dialogue between the violins over low chords from viola and cello. The 20th century was well represented by music from well-known composers. A charmingly salty and tango-esque arrangement of Villa-Lobos’s Aria from Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5 by violinist Jannina Norpoth featured a Bachian violin cadenza on which Norpoth displayed a tone that sang beautifully in the echoey stone chapel.

Schnittke’s String Quartet No. 3 (1983) further blows up the notion of “Baroque” by manipulating a theme from the Renaissance (the “Stabat Mater” by Lassus), one from Beethoven (from the magnificently angular Grosse Fuge), and one from Shostakovich into a journey of rich colors, intense rhythms, macabre howls, and passages of beauty. Tone-cluster sequences sounded like a whole string orchestra in the tall spaces of the Fuentidueña Chapel. In this eye-opening piece especially, the musicians proved themselves masters of tonal variation and broad technique.

My wife wisely pointed out that the Cloisters is an agglomeration of bits and pieces of old stuff combined into something new, and that in a sense, PUBLIQuartet’s “New Baroque” program did something similar. The program closed with another of the quartet’s own creations, “Haydn’s Time Machine,” and then an encore that fused music from Charlie Parker and Claude Debussy. Where can this group go next? I for one plan to stick around and find out.