

THE MORNING CALL

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REVIEW: PUBLIQuartet takes chamber music daring new places at Raritan River Festival

By Steve Siegel

It's a sad state of affairs that the once-common art of classical extemporization, especially in chamber music, has been replaced over the years by the luxury of hearing centuries-old works performed over and over. Thankfully, in recent years there's been a return to exploring new styles, introducing never-before-heard works, and blurring the line between composer and performer

One of the most recent demonstrations that chamber music as an art form is evolving and expanding was Saturday evening's concert by the dynamic young string quartet PUBLIQuartet at Prallsville Mills in Stockton, NJ. The concert was the first of the four-concert Raritan River Chamber Music Festival series.

Just four days after its Carnegie Hall debut, **PUBLIQuartet presented a thoroughly engaging program entirely of contemporary music, fusing the classical with everything from jazz to hip-hop.** With two violins, viola and cello, PQ certainly looks like your traditional string quartet. The creative musicianship of its members, however, takes it in new directions, leading anywhere from Jimi Hendrix' Band of Gypsies to Charlie Parker's bebop band.

The opening work, Jessie Montgomery's 2008 composition "Voodoo Dolls," was a case in point. Grounded in foot-stomping African rhythms, the piece was a mesmerizing blend of oily glissandos, electric guitar-like riffs, and just a scent of bluegrass. Howie Kenty's jarring and sharp-edged "An Impetuous Old Friend," composed in 2012, was a breathtaking study of angular starts and stops, with lots of bowing behind the bridge for scratchy, high-pitched effects

Perhaps most intriguing on the program were works where the group showed its skills at improvisation. Jessie Montgomery's "Breakaway" of 2013 was delightfully free-form, especially its second section, where violist Nick Revel and cellist Amanda Gookin played counterpoint to the antagonist violins of Curtis Stewart and Jannina Norpoth.

In many ways, **the quartet's own 2014 composition "Epistrophe" was the program's centerpiece. Structured around improvisations on Thelonious Monk and Igor Stravinsky, the piece is part of PQ's innovative Mind the Gap program, which juxtaposes compositions from diverse genres. "Epistrophe" seamlessly shifted gears between the two unlikely bedfellows, with Stravinsky's "Danse Russe" and Monk's "Green Chimney's" sounding especially well-suited to each other.**

Villa-Lobos, the "old guy" on the program, was represented by the Aria from his *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5. PQ showed some passionate musicianship in this exotic, Brazilian homage to J.S. Bach, with its lovely, lyrical line voiced first with soulful improvisation by Stewart, followed with a sweet, heartfelt rendering by Norpoth.

Ligetti's String Quartet No. 1 was an intense, complex work, very much in the style of Bartók. Much of it hinted at folk melodies, yet the moments of pure lyricism were few, with feather-light trills on the violins competing with explosive, percussive plucks on the cello. PQ seems to have a knack for bringing out humor in nearly all it performs, and this was no exception, with a hesitant, tipsy waltz and the smile-provoking sound of rubbing strings while bowing them.

David Biedenbender's "Surface Tension" of 2012 roared forward with the urgency of a freight train (somehow, I kept thinking of "Orange Blossom Special"), and Eugene Birman's String Quartet of 2013 was a lovely, chorale-sounding work, with ethereal vocal harmonies in the strings and an overall hint of Gregorian chant.

As a well-deserved encore, the group performed another *Mind the Gap* composition – this one called "Bird in Paris," pitting Claude Debussy with Charlie "Bird" Parker. In this delightful work, French impressionism met American jazz by melding Debussy's "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair," and other choice snippets, with Parker's "Bloomdido" and, I think, "How High the Moon."