PUBLIQuartet: Album Review

By David Olds

You might think that the upcoming holiday hiatus would result in a backlog of new material after the fact, and generally speaking that is indeed what happens. But this month I find my desk already agog (sorry, that’s a misuse of the word, but one I woke up to this morning as I faced the mounting pile of CDs – perhaps it is I who am agog) with a wealth of offerings all worthy of note. I will endeavour to be brief…

Atop the pile is a recent arrival that reminds me why I was drawn to contemporary music, string quartets in particular, in my formative years. PubliQuartet’s eponymous debut release on Concert Artists Guild Records (CAG115 publiquartet.com) grabbed me right from its percussive opening chords. Howie Kenty is not a composer I was previously aware of, but his brief An Impetuous Old Friend seemed just that – rambunctious and familiar, without seeming derivative. As a matter of fact I don’t know any of the composers whose work is included here, although I do find touchstones in their music. Jessie Montgomery is a NYC violinist, composer and music educator. I find many of the extended techniques she uses in Break Away reminiscent of the aboriginal sounds that Peter Sculthorpe incorporated into his string quartet writing. The program note however cites hip-hop and electronica as influences. Eugene Birman’s String Quartet, a 12-minute single movement “experiment in voicing and containing energy” comes across as a meditation, perhaps with echoes of George Crumb’s darker moments. In contrast David Biedenbender’s Surface Tension is all rhythmic drive and percussion.

One of PQ’s initiatives is a series titled Mind The Gap in which the group tries “to generate an interest in new music and keep traditional classical music relevant to modern audiences…[and] to blur the lines between performer and composer; intertwining compositions from seemingly disparate genres.” Two examples of this technique are included, Bird in Paris, juxtaposing Debussy with Charlie Parker and Epistrophy in which Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for String Quartet are very effectively overlaid with themes by iconic jazz pianist Thelonious Monk. While I am not usually a fan of such hybrids I found this a convincing exception to the rule and found myself smiling as the two worlds collided and coalesced.