

Composer, quartet 'respond' to Bartók

MONTALVO CONCERT EXUDES HEAT, ENERGY AND EVEN DANGER

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Composer Kurt Rohde has written his first string quartet. He calls it "Gravities," and it gives the impression of elemental Earth forces at work, sucking together his musical materials, tightly binding them in a dark place, then blasting them apart and back toward the light. It feels mysterious and a little dangerous: The music teems with energy and keeps threatening to explode in your face.

The Cypress String Quartet gave the new piece a powerful, concentrated performance Thursday at the Montalvo Arts Center. The small, appreciative audience was seated practically eyeball-to-eyeball with the musicians in the salon-like main hall of the complex's historic villa. This is the way chamber music should be heard; the heat and impact of the music were inescapable.

Rohde, an affable, low-key storyteller, it turns out, was there to introduce and explain the work, which the Cypress commissioned from him a year ago.

Last summer, he went off to southeastern Utah to begin his composing; you can hear the isolation and desolation of the setting in the piece. Also the heat of the place and the sense of being overcome by its inescapable and timeless power.

You can also hear the influence of Bartók. Every year, the Cypress asks a living composer to participate in its "Call and Response" series of commissions. This time, Rohde was asked to "respond" to the "call" of Bartók's String Quartet No. 6, a darkly psychological, jagged-edged work, composed in 1939, right before Bartók fled Hungarian fascism and moved to the United States.

Rohde quotes here and there from the sixth quartet, but the Bartók influence is largely one of mood: "Gravities" has a sense of dark entrapment about it.

The first movement ("Undertow") begins with a ghostly, long-lined threnody, surging, tugging and *growing*, textures packing tight then unraveling, split by riptides of rhythm and harmony.

In moments of deceptive repose, the harmonies seem trapped in mysterious tide pools, filled with strange bits of glimmering life - hidden bits of beauty with nowhere to go.

The second movement ("Doubts") is dirge-like, entranced (first violinist Cecily Ward played with her eyes closed), struggling for balance.

The finale ("Danced") stacks and balances multiple textures and finally tumbles into a war dance, highly percussive, like Bartók, and filled with fierce bow attacks.

It's a persuasive piece by Rohde, well-known in Bay Area new-music circles as both composer and violist.

And now his reputation is going international: Last week he was named winner of the 2008-09 Elliott Carter Rome Prize, given by the American Academy in Rome. It will take Rohde to Rome for 11 months of "independent artistic pursuit."

In the meantime, you can check out some of his music at kurtrohde.com.

The first half of Thursday's concert was given over to excerpts of works by Mozart, Dvorák, and Bartók: a movement from light to darkness, all building toward Rohde.

The final movement of Mozart's String Quartet in D major, K. 575 (the first of the so-called "Prussian Quartets"), was robust and sun-filled; the room's live acoustic seemed especially to bring out the warmth of the cello (Jennifer Kloetzel) and viola (Ethan Filner).

The Adagio movement from Dvorák's String Quartet in G major, Op. 106, was an outpouring of melody, with Ward leading the way.

There was some rocky intonation in the opening Mesto movement of Bartók's sixth quartet, but mostly, this was a richly expressive performance by the Cypress.

The group continues its series of salon concerts at Montalvo at 3 p.m. May 4, performing Beethoven's late B-flat major quartet, Op. 130. Get more information at www.cypressquartet.com and www.montalvoarts.org.

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