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Classical-Pop Border, No Guards in Sight

By Zachary Woolfe

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Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Chiara String Quartet: The pianist Nico Muhly with the quartet members, from left, Rebecca Fischer, Julie Hye-Yung Yoon, Gregory Beaver and Jonah Sirota at Merkin Concert Hall on Wednesday.

After kicking off with an exciting eight-hour marathon on Monday, the Ecstatic Music Festival, devoted to collaborations by young artists working on the increasingly permeable border between classical music and pop, began in earnest on Wednesday evening with a concert by the Chiara String Quartet at Merkin Concert Hall.

Programmed by the composer Nico Muhly and featuring music of Mr. Muhly and his longtime collaborator, Valgeir Sigurdsson, the concert was part of the quartet's "Creator/Curator Project," which has commissioned both a new work and an evening to surround it from several young composers. Mr. Muhly's contribution, "Diacritical Marks," consisted of eight short movements united by a recurring figure, unsettlingly out of breath. It was the kind of pretty, tightly constructed music that this 29-year-old composer has become known for, but with subtle edges: an ominous plucked cello line in the first movement, and the way the sustained tones in the slow sections didn't quite connect, a hint of dislocation amid the sweet smoothness.

"Diacritical Marks" closed the concert, which was largely devoted to Mr. Sigurdsson's music. Though primarily known as a producer and sound engineer for Mr. Muhly and other artists, like Bjork and Will Oldham, Mr. Sigurdsson has recently ventured more toward his own composing. Featured here was the premiere of his first traditional, acoustic classical work, "Nebraska."

The piece was inspired, the Chiara's violist, Jonah Sirota, said from the stage, by the "big open spaces" of the state where the quartet is based, and there were distant hints of country in virtuosic fiddling passages that evoked both the slowly shifting arpeggios of Minimalism and a surreal hoedown. Discreet percussive effects were reminders of Mr. Sigurdsson's trademark electronic beats.

The mood shifted in the finale, with glassy harmonics undercut by anxious tremolos. The reflective feel connected "Nebraska" to the other works on the program by Mr. Sigurdsson: four pieces from "Dreamland," his 2009 documentary film score, arranged by Mr. Muhly, who joined the quartet at the piano. In "Nowhere Land" and "Helter Smelter," the sound gradually built as the strings sustained chords over muted piano notes. The pieces had the yearning richness associated with elegiac sequences in independent films, but they meandered, and their emotional payoffs — melancholy in the slow moments, exuberant uplift in the fast — felt unearned.

Mr. Muhly showed off Mr. Sigurdsson's work to excellent advantage alongside similarly dignified, slowly unfurling pieces by the 16th-century composers William Byrd, John Dowland and Orlando Gibbons. Mr. Muhly's arrangement of Dowland's Third Lute Fantasy was particularly dazzling, with bursts of ornamentation jumping from instrument to instrument. Placing Mr. Sigurdsson's work in such exalted company was a risk — one that paid off — as well as a moving compliment from one composer to another.

The Ecstatic Music Festival runs through March 28 at Merkin Concert Hall, 129 West 67th Street, Manhattan; (212) 501-3300, ecstaticmusicfestival.com.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/21/arts/music/21chiara.html>