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MUSIC REVIEW

Chiara Quartet conjures ghosts of the Soviet era

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | March 16, 2009

You have to admire any concert program that is not only rewarding on its own terms but also serves as a departure point for broader meanderings through history and cultural politics. The Chiara Quartet, in residence at Harvard University, pulled off just that sort of ingenious balancing act with its recital on Friday night in Paine Hall by modeling its program on one devised by the legendary Borodin Quartet in the Soviet Union in 1975.

Think of it as a bit of Brezhnev-era period performance. Actually, if that were strictly the case, this recital would have been canceled. That in fact was the point.

The Borodin's original program, which paired music from the first and the second Viennese schools, was rejected by Soviet cultural bureaucrats in 1975 prompting a clash of wills that proved to be the last straw for Rostislav Dubinsky, the group's first violinist. Not long after this program was banned, he left the country and eventually settled in the United States, where he taught at Indiana University and wrote a wryly disturbing memoir called "Stormy Applause: Making Music in a Worker's State." It was from that book that the Chiara Quartet - a young American ensemble whose members may or may not have been alive in 1975 - learned of this program. As they rehearsed it for their own recital, they also tried to consider what it was about this music that constituted a threat to the Soviet system.



That deeper question of course could not be answered by a single program but it gave the listener, too, something to mull over while taking in the Chiara's vivid and compelling performances of Berg's Quartet Op. 3, Schoenberg's Second Quartet, and Haydn's "Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross."

The night opened with the Berg, a dark-hued work completed in 1910 full of fierce yet mysterious drama. As individual musicians, the members of the Chiara project very different temperatures in their playing - second violinist Julie Yoon for instance drives the inner voices with a sense of smoldering intensity while cellist Gregory Beaver gives off a sense of preternatural coolness and calm - yet the group came together admirably to render this surging expressionistic music with the character and force it demands.

For Haydn's "Seven Last Words," originally written as an oratorio for the Good Friday service, the Chiara found an appropriately somber and even austere group sound, letting the composer's stark chords speak for themselves by using vibrato far more sparingly. Baritone John Kapusta intoned the various "last words" preceding each of Haydn's seven slow movements.

The highlight of the evening however was the performance, following the Berg, of Schoenberg's Second Quartet with the soprano Lucy Shelton, who brought confident vocalism, arresting intensity, and a dazzling array of colors to the Stefan George texts set by the composer in the final two movements.

These stunning movements - full of both the composer's inner torment and the rapturous discovery of "wind from other planets" - made one wonder whether part of the threat that the Soviets perceived as late as 1975 was in the way this music represented a profound turning inward for the sources of art. In other words, private experience is validated - even sacralized - at the implicit expense of the public (socialist) reality that good Soviet art was supposed to celebrate.

The broader irony of course is that the potency of so much modern music in the 20th century was sensed most keenly by its enemies. Or as Lionel Trilling once commented: "if ever we want to remind ourselves of the nature and power of art, we have only to think of how accurate reactionary governments are in their awareness of that nature and that power." ■