

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

### An Onyx by Any Other Name

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By Thomas Goss

How do performers bring something new to a piece when the score, like an old sock, has been washed through a listener's ears so many times the shocking hues are worn to a faint pastel? Take a quartet of musicians with a gorgeous and radiant tone and set it loose on the material, that's how. Under the fingertips of the Left Coast Chamber Ensemble last Monday night, the Bartók Second String Quartet lost the dust of its gilded modernity and became simply and powerfully what it is: the most beautiful and compelling of Bartók's quartets, perhaps the most perfect piece of writing in his entire oeuvre.

The string quartet core of Left Coast is, of course, the constituency of the Onyx String Quartet. They achieved interpretive heights in the Bartók comparable to its performance by such quartets as the Tokyo, the Kronos, and the Emerson.

Onyx has a unique chesty brilliance, a sweetness and penetration as thrilling and sensitive as a cabaret singer. This vocal quality dominated the smoky darkness of the opening Moderato, intensifying the episodes and imbuing them with inquietude. In the following Allegro molto, the passion and humor the quartet lent to the music never wanted for elegance and synchronicity. Its muted final passages were executed with an almost supernatural exactness. But they shone brightest in the harrowing Lento, showing how a slow movement can close a piece with greater effect than a fast one if the musicians give it everything.

#### **A tasty appetizer: Kurtág's Mikroludien**

A worthy appetizer was served by the same players in presenting a 10-minute work by Rumanian composer György Kurtág, in keeping with the Eastern European theme of the program. If the word *prelude* means literally "foreplay," and *postlude* means "after play," then a *Mikrolude* must be a "tiny play."

And so these pieces were, bits and scraps that made up the *Hommage à Mihaly Andras — 12 Mikroludien*. Each seemed to state a penultimacy extracted from a larger concept, a dash of microtonal maunder, a wisp of Webern in a Shostakovian breeze, breathy squeeze-box upper strings tickled by diving cello pizzicati. What appeared at first to be offhand shreds of a compositional crazy quilt gained a clarity of structure over time, comparable to the perspective of a viewer of a large and complex mural who steps farther and farther back.

#### **Bogdanovich leads us *Over the Edge***

Another group within a group was represented, in this case the eclectic Almaduo, Michael Goldberg on guitar and Phyliss Kamrin on violin, fleshed out to a trio with the addition of cellist Leighton Fong. Local Yugoslavian transplant Dusan Bogdanovich was represented in a performance of his recent work *Over the Edge*,

three movements that explore a variety of moods in a loose theme-and-variations structure.

But structure was not what defined the piece. Rather, my ear was struck by the willingness of the music to indulge its whim through color and emotion. The opening, a long, soulful violin melody over quivering cello fifths, gave way to gypsified double stops repeating in an accelerating and ritarding bounce. The guitar seemed at times to be more continuo than soloist under the gripping crush of trilled melodies as the music progressed. Then that instrument took part in a meditation, to which its bowed companions were mere commentators. Eventually, the three voices were more clearly defined and cohesively engaged. Kamrin brought out the feel of her alternate expertise as violist in the rich, dark lines as the music came to a dramatic crux, to which the recapped tremolandi that closed the piece seemed somewhat anticlimactic.

One of the admirable traits of these musicians, whether they play as Onyx or as the Left Coast Ensemble, is that they interpret premodern works with the same attitude as they maintain toward the best of the contemporary literature. With these folks, the earlier music feels contemporary, not with a forced modernist esthetic, but with a sense of moment. In the Dvorák String Quintet in G Major, which finished the evening, the music felt almost as hip, awake, and unperfumed as if it had been written the day before. And that was the only way it could have followed the Bartók, that's for sure!

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