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Cypress Quartet in Stellar Performance: Ruehr, Schubert



By Patrick Valentino

Wellesley, MA, 17 March, 2010. Surrounded by the vast yet invitingly warm wood beams of the Houghton Chapel & Multifaith Center on the campus of Wellesley College, the Cypress Quartet gave a stellar performance of innovatively balanced program which featured soprano Andrea Matthews and a premiere of a composition by Elena Ruehr.

The program consisted of Ms. Ruehr's work *Bel Canto*, based on the Ann Patchett novel of the same name, and Schubert's epic quartet *Death and the Maiden*, D.810. Introducing each of the major works was a selection of art songs and operatic excerpts: music linked to the story of *Bel Canto* for the premiere, and Schubert's own song *Der Tod und das Mädchen* to preface his quartet, and which contains material used in the variation movement.

The pleasing equilibrium of the program was not an accident. The composition from Ms. Ruehr is part of a Cypress Quartet initiative called *Call & Response*, whereby the group commissions a composer to write a new work in response to an existing work, in this case the Schubert (and Mozart K.575, which was included in a previous concert). The Quartet then performs the 'call' and 'response' side-by-side, creating context and connection for the new work, and perhaps even providing new insight into the older one.

The Quartet performed impeccably with flawless rhythmic accuracy and a variety of tone colors. With their signature 'bottom-up' sound (that is, taking their cue from the lowest pitch and balancing up rather than the opposite approach of following the leading line, often on top) they breathed life into the narrative form of *Bel Canto*. The musical characterizations of people and situations from the novel were masterfully crafted by Ruehr, and dramatically executed by the ensemble. The prelude quartet of songs, including two which were mentioned in the novel, and one by Schubert, provided a welcome introduction to the evening's themes: a connection between written text and instrumental music, and the approach that a classical and contemporary composer takes to bridge the two.

Soprano Andrea Matthews's performances were also commendable. In the first half, she sang Dvorak's *Song of the Moon* from *Rusalka*, *The Crucifixion* by Barber, Schubert's *Der Doppelgänger*, and finally *Vissi d'arte* from *Tosca*. To open the second half, Ms. Matthews returned to sing Schubert's *Tod und das Mädchen* before the eponymous quartet. One would have liked to hear a more marked difference in the final Schubert song, where the singer is charged with embodying both the characters of the innocent young woman and the specter of Death, but her effortless performance and shimmering tone quality was a joy to listen to all the same.

The Schubert quartet could be considered a risky choice for the end of any concert. For the audience, it is quite long; for the musicians, a powerhouse ride which allows almost no place to slack the energy and drive. The performance was magnificent, helped contextually by the parallel nature of the concert program, and kept alive artistically by the sheer virtuosity of the Cypress Quartet. The first movement's tricky ensemble passages were flawless, while the balance of the slow variation movement, with all its repetition, allowed gradual but evident organic growth which gave its form purpose. The closing *Scherzo* and *Presto* movements were as fresh and energized as the first notes of the evening. The appreciative audience brought the performing artists back for three well-earned curtain calls, for which the Cypresses (as they are called) graciously performed a beautiful encore.

It has been my pleasure to review for CVNewEng a previous CD from the Quartet, also of music by Elena Ruehr, and have recently heard their recording of Beethoven Op. 131 and 135. I am consistently impressed with the sheer quality, consistency, and artistry of this ensemble. Coupled with their ingenious *Call & Response* program, their proud dedication to fostering relationships with the creators of new music, and their signature sound, (which must be heard to be appreciated) the Cypress Quartet stands as a powerful force for the music of the future, and

revelatory performers of music of the past. Best of luck to them.

Editor's note: Patrick Valentino's review may be found in Reviews at the following link:

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