

New Zealand Quartet at the Frick Collection in New York "...uncommon eloquence"

The New York Times (11/12/03)
CLASSICAL MUSIC

Performers From Down Under, Along With Composers

New Zealand String Quartet
Frick Collection

When an ensemble visits from a distant land it is a de facto emissary of that country's musical culture. So it made good sense that the New Zealand String Quartet, in its New York debut on Sunday afternoon at the Frick Collection, chose to intersperse two works by New Zealand composers with standard repertory by Bartok and Beethoven.

The first was by John Psathas, "Abhisheka," which was inspired by a Buddhist text and, as the audience was told, represents the composer's attempt to write music free of ego. One might imagine that such music could also be called silence, but this was not the case. Rather, the ego for Mr. Psathas is apparently connected to the traditional division of the octave into 12 notes.

It was this division that he clearly renounced for this intriguing work, full of microtones that helped produce a haze of quiet sustained chords, drifting in and out of aural focus, while solo gestures crested above the blurry bed of sound. The quartet's command of intonation - the key to such a piece - was impressive, though the occasional use of vibrato seemed a strange choice in a work that relied on such careful manipulation of minute intervals. "Abhisheka" left a stronger impression than Jack Body's "Three Transcriptions," based on recordings of a Jew's harp from southern China, a zither from Madagascar and a Bulgarian folk orchestra. As is often the case, dressing up Western instruments in ethnic garb, however bright and creative the costumes may be, did little other than whet the appetite for hearing the originals.

Between the works by their compatriots, the New Zealanders played Bartok's wartime Second String Quartet, staking out a respectable stylistic middle ground that acknowledged the music's astringency but also its unlikely lyricism. Of course, Bartok also used folk materials, but he mostly avoided mimicry and instead integrated them into his sophisticated modernist idiom.

Beethoven's wonderful Quartet Opus 59, No. 1, completed the program. The group had not quite mastered the tricky acoustics of the rounded Frick performance space, and the balances sometimes faltered, but the playing was generally fluid and energetic, rising up to a few moments of uncommon eloquence. -- *Jeremy Eichler*