

New Zealand String Quartet with guest artist Richard Nunns in Reading, PA

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CONCERT REVIEW: New Zealand String Quartet features composition with Maori instruments of jade, whale tooth

The string ensemble treats its Reading audience to Mendelssohn and Schubert as well.

By Susan L. Peña
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Berks County, PA - The New Zealand String Quartet brought sounds evoking an exotic land to Reading on Saturday night.

The group played in Reading Area Community College's Miller Center as part of the Downtown Performing Arts Series.

Violinists Helene Pohl and Douglas Beilman, violist Gillian Ansell and cellist Rolf Gjelsten were joined by Richard Nunns, the world's leading expert on Maori instruments, who played some of these instruments in a piece by New Zealand composer Gillian Karawe Whitehead.

Her very unusual "Hine-pu-te-hue," written for the New Zealand String Quartet and premiered in 2002, incorporates instruments made of gourd, wood, jade, shell and whale tooth, whose gentle sounds are echoed by the quartet instruments.

Named for the Maori goddess of peace, the composition began with the sound of a jade gong, softly shaken rattles and a gourd which Nunns swung by a string in circles, producing a slight humming sound. This was echoed by Pohl on her violin; tiny sounds, like insect voices carried on the wind, were made by the rest of the quartet.

This kind of dialogue continued with a mouth bow, flutes of various sizes, a big gourd representing the voice of the goddess when blown, a conch shell trumpet and percussion instruments, all fading to silence as the lights dimmed.

This eerie, fascinating piece served as the centerpiece; the rest of the concert was more traditional. [continued on pg 2]

The quartet played standing up, except for Gjelsten, who perched on a small platform so his head was roughly level with the others'. **Their sound was silvery and tender, sometimes lightning quick, often meditative. They seemed to savor what they produced, like excellent cooks breathing in the aromas they create.**

They opened with Felix Mendelssohn's String Quartet in E minor, achieving a balance, in the first and final movements, of high energy and bittersweet lyricism.

The inner movements were also highly contrasted: **You could almost see the sparks fly off their bows in the flickering Scherzo, and the two violins intertwined sweetly over the sonorous lower strings in the Andante.**

Franz Schubert's magnificent String Quartet No. 15 in G Major — his last — took up the second half of the concert. **Beautiful, spine-chilling crescendos opened the first movement, which unfolded like a well-told story, with playing both remarkably delicate and highly dramatic.**

In the Andante, the cello sang like an excellent baritone singing lieder; their approach to the Scherzo was appropriately whimsical, with a charmingly dance-like trio.

They took the finale at a full-out gallop; the constantly returning theme of this merry rondo sounded like a Rossini comic aria, and the other sections were by turns dramatic, lyrical and menacing.

While there were plenty of exciting moments during this wonderful concert, it was the quiet moments that stood out, giving it a spiritual quality.

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