

New Zealand String Quartet

Premiere- Timothy Corliss: *Raven and the First Men*

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James Campbell & New Zealand String Quartet by Stanley Fefferman



Thursday, November 25, Walter Hall, Toronto

James Campbell says he has played the Mozart *Quintet in A Major for clarinet and strings, K.581* about 350 times, and each time he finds something new in it. The *Quintet* has been a living presence with me for more than 50 years, and after Campbell's collaboration with the New Zealand String Quartet, I have no hope of hearing it played better.

The concert began with Campbell and pianist Paul Stewart's performance of *Sonata No.1 in F Minor for clarinet and piano* by Johannes Brahms...

After intermission, we had another 'world première' of backward-looking homage. Timothy Corliss' *Raven and the First Men* honours Bill Reid's sculpture of the same title (which appears on the back of the Canadian 20 dollar bill). This five-part composition is very fine work—warm and accessible, variously textured in keening, quivering, squalling, droney sonics punctuated by pizzicatos and wonderful glissandos that surge in wave after wave of music to an exciting climax. Standing ovation for this work commissioned by the WMCT. The music is beautifully synched to a film in which the camera pans slowly over the golden-toned textures and furrows carved into the wood of Bill Reid's sculpture.

The rest is Mozart. Even before Campbell's clarinet entered the moderately paced "Allegro" with its liquid flights of skylarking the first of three themes, Rolf Gyselsten's

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resonant cello and his wide-awake demeanour caught my attention and held it through all four movements. The exquisite Larghetto—the heart of this achingly tender piece—begins as an aria for the mellow clarinet shadowed by the cello singing harmony. In the second section, Helène Pohl’s soothing first violin joins in a duet that enlivens the clarinet into a delicate rapture, while the muted strings spread an iridescent glow.

Gillian Ansel’s viola leads the “Oranges and Lemons” theme that opens the “Scherzo” bringing the mood to earth with glittering dance rhythms, and in the second “Trio” the clarinet solos a humorous *aria* over the strings. The final “Vivace” is a five-part variation that sounds like a chamber opera— gay in the first variation led by the two violins, bouncy in the second, mournful in the third, with a virtuosic clarinet cadenza in the fourth, and a fifth that goes teasingly slow to prepare the surprise of the climax.

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