



HEADLINE: *A Fine Evening with the New Zealand Quartet*

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Washington Post By Robert Battey
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The New Zealand String Quartet’s lively concert Saturday at the Dumbarton Church was the first of a four-date North American tour. (Two are in Canada.) The group is a franchise, like the Juilliard Quartet; founded nearly 30 years ago, it has but one original member (now the only one born and trained in New Zealand), and its newest musician joined earlier this year. As this was my first encounter with the quartet, I can’t address its artistic evolution, but I admired its professionalism and spirit.

Bookended by standard repertoire, the program’s main interest for me was in works by two New Zealand composers, Gareth Farr and Jack Body. Farr’s piece, “Te Tai-o-Rehua,” written in 2013, begins with gurgling cells of notes, like

flower petals swirling around in eddies of water. It transitions to a driving, Bartókian dance over insistent ostinatos. (The Bartók influence is further felt in the harmonies of stacked fifths, eerie sound effects and a uniquely constructed scale that gave the music its feeling of unity.)

Body’s contribution was not New Zealand music but a transcription (for the Kronos Quartet) of three different pieces for indigenous instruments from China, Madagascar and Bulgaria. The string quartet literature is too vast for any group to ever fully explore, so adding transcriptions seems like a misplaced effort to me. But this collection of “world music” was the hit of the night. In “Long Gi Yi,” each

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instrument was assigned only a few pitches, but they bumped up against one another in delightful rhythmic combinations. “Ramandriana” was a rollicking dance in a mostly pizzicato texture. “Ratschenita” also invoked Bartók (the Scherzo of his Fifth Quartet) with its frantic asymmetrical meter, and it was punctuated with foot-stomping. I would like to hear some of Body’s original work, but this selection and his arrangement were terrific.

In classics of Haydn (String Quartet, Op. 71, No. 2) and Brahms (Viola Quintet, Op. 88, with guest artist Maria Lambros), the players showed fastidious care and stylish music-making. The admirable refinement in the Haydn piece carried over perhaps too much into the quintet, where short notes lacked Brahmsian weight and climaxes sounded a bit tame. Still, a fine evening.

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