

The Calder Quartet rolls along with Beethoven



As Mikael Wood recently wrote in *The Times*, Chuck Berry all but invented rock 'n' roll with songs such as "Roll Over Beethoven." That is certainly noteworthy, but Berry was hardly the first to rock with, or roll all over, Beethoven.

A reasonable way to ponder classical music (and beyond) of the last two centuries is through Beethoven obsession, now driven by a new generation.

Sunday afternoon, the Calder Quartet began the second installment of its three-year Beethoven quartet cycle at the Eli and Edythe Broad Stage in Santa Monica. Over the course of three concerts, one a month, the ensemble plays an early and a middle-period Beethoven string quartet, with something new by an emerging composer inserted in between.

Like the Calder foursome, the three composers are in their 30s and have strong local ties. Christopher Cerrone, whose new work was to have been played Sunday, gave us "Invisible Cities," premiered by the Industry at Union Station in 2014. The other two composers also have made recent operatic splashes: Andrew McIntosh's "Bonnie and Clyde" was given a reading by the Industry a month ago, and Ted Hearne's "The Source" was staged by Los Angeles Opera earlier this season.

Even so, there is no telling what you will get. Busy working on a commission by Los

Angeles Chamber Orchestra for May, Cerrone missed his deadline and quickly adapted a short recent piano piece for string quartet in its place. The commissioned new work will instead be given its premiere in December by the Calder at Walt Disney Concert Hall in a program of works by Schubert and Schoenberg.

That frees the 33-year-old Cerrone from being sandwiched by Beethoven's Opus 18, No. 1 in F Major, and Opus 59, No. 1, also in F Major. Both quartets were published while Beethoven was in his 30s, and they show how remarkably quickly he was able to expand the scope, ambition and demands of the Haydn and Mozart string quartet model.

Yet to his considerable credit, Cerrone came up with a little offering, "Ponte Musmeci," that proved a perfect Beethovenian palate cleanser. At the same time, it illuminated the Calder's seemingly conventional approach to Beethoven.

Mainly, though, Cerrone's "Ponte Musmeci" made for seven minutes of astonishing listening. Its inspiration was a bridge in the Italian town of Potenza, and it represents a composer's appreciation for what he calls the "infinitely malleable" nature of concrete, something he discovered walking through the substructure of the bridge.

Clearly there is also something impressively malleable about Cerrone's music, given that the string quartet version provides no hint of its origins as the first movement of "The Arching Path," written last year for the pianist Vicky Chow. Squeaky high repeated notes in the violins at first made the bridge sound as though it were a mouse rollercoaster. When the lower strings came in, it became harder and harder to tell where any of the sounds were coming from or how they were being made. Here the concrete seemed to be creamily transformed into something resembling a freshly made mozzarella.

Calder-ized Beethoven has dollops of that kind of creaminess as well. For an ensemble as attuned to the present as the Calder, which regularly plays new music and has its own connection to rock 'n' roll (often collaborating with Airborne Toxic Event), the four can seem unusually traditional for their generation. Unlike so many string quartets that attempt to seem hip, the all-male Calder dresses relatively traditionally (matching tight suits) and doesn't try to roll over Beethoven with the aggressive accents, sexed-up rhythms or goofy emphases on minor details that have become predictable with young European quartets.

That these were straightforward, old-school interpretations may be due in part to the fact that Calder is still growing into the scores. The players relied on what they are particularly good at, namely, producing a beautifully rounded and unified sound, as well as showing a generous sense of musical camaraderie, as the quartet did — slyly, it so happened — for

the opening of Opus 18, No. 1.

What at first seemed a fine demonstration of Classical period balance, grace and good sense was only a setup. When the players then ripped into the development section with an infectious enthusiasm, they made visceral Beethoven's revolutionary spirit.

The same trick was repeated with the first movement of the later F-major quartet, the first of the three "Razumovsky" Quartets (named for the Russian count who commissioned them). Yet the players managed to create another surprise. So addictively flowing was this movement's far more effusive opening that it was easy to forget all else, and then, with a listener's defenses down, the Calder did it again, when drama was called for.

After that, the glowing slow movement sounded as though a little of Cerrone's concrete mozzarella had seeped in. The Russian dance at the end was lively enough to not need an encore for the concert.

Something may be in the air with the "Razumovsky" quartets. Camerata Pacifica's politically daring program the first week in April (at Pasadena, downtown L.A., Ventura and Santa Barbara venues) puts Beethoven's Opus 59, No. 2, in the company of John Harbison's "Abu Ghraib," Michael Daugherty's "Sing Sing: J Edgar Hoover" and John Cage's silent piece, "4'33'". The last performance, on April 9, is the same day as the Calder's McIntosh premiere with the same Beethoven quartet at the Broad Stage. The new Hearne piece and third Razumovsky are May 14.

So, yes, Chuck Berry, you could create rock 'n' roll (and write a great Beethoven song), but thus far no one has been able to get Beethoven to roll over and play dead.



Calder Quartet

Where: Eli and Edythe Broad Stage, 1310 11th St., Santa Monica

When: 4 p.m. April 9 and May 14

Tickets: Start at \$36

Information: (310) 434-3200, www.thebroadstage.com

mark.swed@latimes.com

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