

**MUSIC**

## Calder Quartet shines in both new and old music

Joshua Kosman | on April 13, 2017

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Photo: Autumn De Wild

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## Calder Quartet

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A string quartet that can play Beethoven as powerfully as the Calder Quartet is an important asset to the musical ecosphere, to be sure, though perhaps not an especially uncommon one. But a group that can make new music sound thoroughly vibrant and sensual — well, that’s something to cherish.

In a transfixing recital presented in Herbst Theatre on Wednesday, April 12, by San Francisco Performances, the ensemble devoted the entire first half of its program to two recent masterpieces by the British composer Thomas Adès, and punctuated the event with a breathtakingly beautiful work by the young American Andrew Norman. The result was an exemplary model of how to integrate old and new works so that they communicate tellingly with one another.

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Certainly Adès is a composer for whom the past is never very far away. His early quartet “Arcadiana,” written at 23, is among other things a compendium of musical

and other allusions — to the compositional models of Schubert, Debussy, Elgar and others, and to the artistic and literary traditions that invoke an idyllic pastoral landscape.

Yet if that description makes the work sound like heavy going, the reality is anything but. Through seven fleet and pointed movements, Adès' touch is so light and beguiling that the allusions seem to skitter along below the surface, like a silvery fish swimming through clear water — look away and you could easily miss them.

The composer's own creative voice, meanwhile, comes through with utmost clarity — in the gently lapping textures of the opening "Venezia notturna," in the death-tinted tango of the central movement, in the sumptuous hymn "O Albion" or the eerie, disintegrating fade of the final "Lethe." To listen to this piece is to marvel, again and again, at the resources this young genius already had under his control.

Those resources and others are brought to even fuller fruition in the astonishing 2010 work "The Four Quarters," which opened the program. Here Adès walks a marvelous line between simplicity and unpredictability, between aggressive skittering and sheer ravishing loveliness.

One movement creates a pointillistic texture in straightforward four-note phrases, one per instrument at a steady pace, that gradually thickens and then scales back again in a dexterous palindrome. There's a fierce colloquy of pizzicato notes that fall in and out of sync with one another, and in the final movement, a defiantly odd metric profile is put to almost rhapsodically expressive use.

In both pieces, the Calder Quartet — violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers — caught perfectly Adès' blend of technical prowess and personal immediacy, letting the constructive details of the music register without impeding its communicative ardor.

Just as impressive was the group’s rendition of “Sabina,” Norman’s magnificent evocation of sunrise in an old Roman church (the piece is a version of one movement from the composer’s great string trio “The Companion Guide to Rome”). Starting from a low, shadowy beginning, the piece blossoms in a virtuosic combined metaphor of both light and sound; it passes from meditative stasis to a rich, fluttering texture, all set against a subliminal backdrop of breathing.

The piece gives considerable latitude to performers, and the Calder’s rendition — urgent, committed, with a rough-hewn elegance — could scarcely have been bettered. Nor could a listener have asked for a more vividly shaped or provocative account of Beethoven’s E-Minor Quartet, Op. 59, No. 2, than the one that followed intermission.

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