



Boston Cello Quartet blends virtuosity, humor

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ORLEANS — Featuring arrangements that veered seamlessly from humor to pathos, the Boston Cello Quartet christened a new home for the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival Tuesday evening. In the festival's first appearance in Orleans, at United Methodist Church, the quartet played multiple re-workings of classics by one of its members, Blaise Déjardin.

Go on, admit it: You never knew that cello quartets even existed. The grouping is pretty rare, to be sure, and music that exists for four cellists even rarer. Fortunately for this quartet, composed of some of the latest additions to the Boston Symphony Orchestra cello section, Déjardin is a talented and prolific arranger. For this performance he reworked pieces from the classical world (Mozart, Debussy, Mendelssohn, Chabrier), from the popular repertory (John Williams, Leroy Anderson) and even tossed in one of his own compilations.

The evening might be remembered for its humorous episodes — we'll get to "La Bamba" in a bit — but these guys can flat-out play. Performing virtuosically and making it seem hard is one thing; playing tough stuff and making it look fun and second-nature is what this quartet accomplished.

Some of the works were more successful than others; basically, when the music was arranged to imitate some of the more high-pitched instruments, the pieces and the players got stretched. But some arrangements, particularly Déjardin's emotional settings of Williams' theme from the film "Angela's Ashes," or a striking setting of Chabrier's exotic "España," carried all the musical weight of any chamber quartet, no matter what instrumentation.

Déjardin, Mihail Jojatu, Alexandre Lecarme and Adam Esbensen have all joined the BSO cello section in the past decade or so, and formed the quartet in 2010. They have commissioned works specifically for themselves, including Turkish composer Mehmet Ali Sanlikol's atmospheric "Blue Typhoon," which they performed on this program, and have made a mark with concerts at Tanglewood and elsewhere. The bulk of their music comes from the clever work of Déjardin, who transforms symphonic works and other settings into attractive configurations for four similar instruments.

Although none of the pieces had the extended musical development of a major string quartet or piano trio, this sample of pastiches, aided greatly by virtuosity and humor, made for a terrific concert. The group alternated chairs, so each member had a crack at the lead melody.

Sanlikol's piece made an immediate impression. With sinewy lines evoking Middle Eastern singers, and a jazzy underpinning, "Blue Typhoon" had an organic quality that could only be reproduced by four cellos. Similarly, Déjardin's settings of Chabrier and Debussy (nicely articulated by Lecarme in the first chair), and a striking reworking of Mozart's overture to "The Abduction From the Seraglio" that began the evening, were perfectly suited to the ensemble.

Works like the impossibly fast "Dance of the Elves" and Anderson's "Fiddle-Faddle," complete with hoots from the players, added a light touch.

Similarly, Déjardin's own "Variations on a New World," introduced as themed exploration of Dvorak's great symphony, turned out to be a romp through various musical allusions, including highbrow works like Beethoven's violin concerto and lowbrow works like "Frère Jacques." And even "La Bamba," where Déjardin produced a pair of sunglasses from somewhere and grinned crazily throughout.

In Concert

What: Boston Cello Quartet, part of the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival

When: Tuesday night; festival runs through Aug. 22

Where: United Methodist Church, Orleans; continues at various venues

Festival tickets and information: www.capecodchambermusic.org or 508-247-9400

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