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The Borromeo String Quartet and pianist Donald Berman play the premiere performance of 'The Worlds Revolve,' by composer Elena Ruehr. COURTESY PHOTO

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Jun. 10, 2016 at 2:43 PM

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World premieres are the red-carpet highlight in the life of a composer. Working alone for months or even years before a piece gets completed, the spotlight finally shines. An appearance onstage — a chance to speak to the first audience. Well-rehearsed musicians to bring the composition to life. A rare moment of acclaim, in a life where solitude is the norm.

For composer Elena Ruehr, the Rockport Chamber Music Festival has been the scene of several such highlights. Previously, her "Song of the Silkie," as well as her second string quartet, were debuted during the festival. Thursday evening her first quintet, "The Worlds Revolve," received its premiere, performed by pianist Donald Berman and the Borromeo String Quartet.

As with previous compositions, Ruehr based the quintet on a literary work — the fourth Prelude of T.S. Eliot. But as she explained before the concert, while the poem was the original source, her own upbringing on the wild shores of northern Lake Superior had just as much to do with it.

The empty spaces there — and long-abandoned smoke stacks from a copper smelter — along with the feelings those abandoned structures evoked, served as background. The four movements of the quintet got their musical genesis from verses of the poem: for the first, a sense of something ancient; secondly, two women, powerful, dangerous and magical; fire and wood; and finally, a feeling of absence, or vacancy.

But red-carpet moments do not last. A composition must stand on its own musically for longevity — apart from the composer's inspirations, explanations or intent. And "The Worlds Revolve" does just that.

It shows strengths that Ruehr has showcased in previous works: rhythmic energy; accessible melodies, invested with small, quirky dissonances and unexpected shifts; the surefire swell and release of intensity.

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"The Worlds Revolve" engages both the piano and the quartet. But rather than an interaction for five musicians, the composition creates two groups: the keyboard is one, the strings the other.

A rudimentary folk melody — imaginary — opens the piece. This idea angles its way through the first movement, the piano stating it more firmly. The second movement balances robust gestures with gentle ones — one particular motif, a run up the scales that all the instrumentalists play at one point or another — sounds like a signature.

The third movement evokes fire, and sounds fiery. The finale — the composer's intent was to create structures then abandon them — begins with a descending arpeggio, then recalls the folk tune introduced in the first movement. Vigorous give-and-take between pianist and strings works its way to what seems like a conclusion — but it's just a pause. The coda itself is mild, contemplative, uncertain.

The players — Berman especially — brought intensity to the performance, investing the dynamics with particular energy, making the work transcend its foundation in ideas and engage viscerally.

Borromeo opened the evening with first violinist Nicholas Kitchen's arrangements of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier." Kitchen reverse-engineered Bach's keyboard creation — which includes two complete sets of Preludes and Fugues in all the major and minor keys — into four voices. In this performance, the quartet played the major and minor arrangements in C, C-sharp, D and E-flat.

A great performance of the "Well-Tempered Clavier" glitters with ornate, Baroque luster. The magic of its density gets heightened by the fact that one player can achieve so much at the keyboard.

That allure gets somewhat diminished when divided among four players — but only somewhat. The fugues especially leapt off the page in Kitchen's re-working, and his colleagues brought a fresh insight to the music's complexity.

Not content simply to program a re-statement of one of the most famous works in music, as well as a world premiere, Borromeo performed Beethoven's demanding Op. 127 quartet after intermission.

All of Beethoven's late quartets present difficulties, both for performers and for audiences. In this reading, the challenges belonged to listeners only. Enthusiastic and confident, Borromeo phrased the quartet with exacting precision and technical command.

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival continues through July 22. For tickets and information visit www.rockportmusic.org or call 978-546-7391.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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 **Drawing and Painting** 5:30 pm
Rockport Middle/High School

 **"Forgotten Churches of Pigeon Cove, 1874-1940"** 7:30 pm

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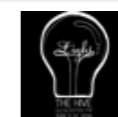
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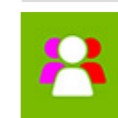
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10:00 am

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