

### *Colin Currie and the Miró Quartet: Appreciating Originality*

Bringing this year's concert season to a satisfying close, the audience at Convocation Hall spent the evening with the renowned Miró Quartet, appearing alongside the formidable percussionist-genius, Colin Currie. Theirs was a collaborative program which should be applauded not only for its hair-raising display of instrumental pyrotechnics, but also for its honest aim of presenting music for the obscure but interesting combination of percussion and string quartet to the fore. Programming new or unknown music carries with it a degree of risk. However, in a well-balanced concert such as this, which offered just as much to conservative listeners as it did those with more curious musical tastes, most audience members would find it hard to walk away from the hall *not* thinking about what they'd heard.

Opening the evening was one of Beethoven's most terse and inaccessible string quartets - the op. 95, self-titled *Quartetto Serioso*. If this work was chosen in an effort to perhaps appease less-adventurous listeners, it was reflective of the overall aim of the concert - to present the audience with music that would make them think, not simply listen. 1810, the year of the quartet's composition, was the beginning of a creative dry spell for its composer, though the few significant works which do emanate from this period reveal a developing musical grammar that would eventually culminate in the great masterpieces of the end of his life. This music was not written to please the ear. The composer himself stated that he'd written it for only a "small circle of connoisseurs," and even withheld it from publication for years after - not surprising, commercially speaking. The op. 95 quartet is one of Beethoven's most experimental and uncompromising works in the genre; the tone of the work is violent and jarring almost throughout until the very end, when it bursts into a drunkenly exuberant, nose-thumbing coda (as if the past fifteen-or-so minutes were nothing more than a stressful prank at the listener's expense). Beethoven was known for a having a crude sense of humour.

Colin Currie and the Miró Quartet next performed *Strophe*, their own collaboratively commissioned work from American composer (and former New York Philharmonic timpanist) Joseph Pereira. In spite of its ferocious atonality and complicated musical texture, *Strophe* shared a remarkably

similar tone to the Beethoven quartet heard just prior. Cast as a concerto for vibraphone, Currie put on a thrilling display of technical virtuosity and ingenuity (at one point even playing the vibraphone with a string bow) in an impressive, and relatively *new* composition, that was no doubt written to exhibit the far extremes of percussion playing. Even to those in the audience for whom Pereira's concerto perhaps seemed a departure from more well-known classic repertoire, the level of skill and intensity present in this performance was undeniable. Not only did *Strophe* succeed in showing the consummate musicianship of all the players; it also brought Pereira's name to the fore as a talented composer of highly original and exciting contemporary music.

In the interest of bringing the temperature down, Currie and the Miró next presented Michael Torke's desert-themed tone poem *Mojave*. Torke's upbeat, attractively rhythmical work provided some respite from the storm and stress of the two previous works. *Mojave* offered up an untroubled musical depiction of the open road, aurally surveying the arid landscape across which the Interstate 15 links Los Angeles to Las Vegas. Similar in its rhythms and unchained musical inertia was the last offering of the program - Steve Martland's *Starry Night*, inspired by the titular Van Gogh painting. Martland's rendering of Van Gogh's impressionistic landscape aptly displayed the composer's remarkable musical sensibility and nuance through an unceasing pulse and motion reminiscent of Philip Glass, coupled with the shimmering textures of a Ravel work.

The most inaccessible music was likely that of Norwegian composer Rolf Wallin's highly abstract. *Realismos Mágicos*, inspired by the writings of Gabriel García Márquez. Connoisseur music, if ever there was such a thing, *Realismos Mágicos* was a bold solo program choice on Currie's part, though an understandable one. Wallin's set of eleven miniatures, I think, mystified the audience for the most part, though, in all fairness, this sort of music is difficult to appraise based on a single hearing. Without being familiar with this or any of Wallin's other work, I can at least say with complete surety that if nothing else, these pieces demonstrated the consummate professionalism and devotion which Colin Currie brings to his performances. I often found myself wondering how he was able to accurately count time - the printed score of this music must be a nightmare.

At a concert which featured so much previously unknown and new contemporary music, the Miró Quartet also briefly tipped their hats to Schubert - a composer whose chamber music the group has had previous success in recording. Though the 1820 *Quartettsatz* (or “quartet-movement”) stands as the only completed portion of a string quartet that was to ultimately remain unfinished at his death, the anguish and urgency of this music illustrates Schubert as a composer who, though less than half Beethoven’s age, was already fast closing in on him in terms of developing musical expression in a burgeoning romantic idiom. The fact that this work exists only in a few fragments and yet is still so often performed is testament enough to the searing artistic genius of the tragic young Schubert.

Colin Currie and the Miró Quartet could not escape the applause at the evening’s close, and were called up again to perform an encore which they themselves had commissioned. No doubt, some left Convocation Hall talking only about the more familiar features of the night’s program - fair enough, considering the abstract compositional idioms and musical language of the contemporary works the group played so passionately. However, their efforts to bring new music to us must be appreciated and even non-musical types must have at least enjoyed the stunning technical displays and musicianship that made this season’s closing concert both engaging and gratifying. The players of the Miró Quartet and Colin Currie are all musicians of tremendous skill and knowledge; what no doubt surpasses this skill and knowledge, however, is the passion which they advocate for the music they love.