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Review: Christopher Rouse At The International Festival of Arts and Ideas



By DANA ASTMANN
3:05 p.m. EDT, June 29, 2010

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The American composer Christopher Rouse has made his name writing orchestral music and has written only three chamber works in over twenty years, so a premiere of a Rouse chamber work is a rare event. On Friday evening, the International Festival of Arts and Ideas presented the intrepid Calder Quartet in the premiere of Rouse's String Quartet No. 3 in New Haven's Sprague Hall.

The all-Rouse concert, called "Transfiguration," also offered the String Quartet No. 2 (1988), the septet "Compline" (1996), and two works for percussion ensemble featuring the Yale Percussion Group.

The presence of the percussion works initially seemed incongruous. After all, no work on the program combined the percussionists and the string quartet. But the heady performances of the established Calder Quartet and the youthful Yale Percussion Group highlighted parallels in the music: a fearless approach to layers of rhythm and sound, a keen ear for tone color, and a delight in sheer complexity. The abandon of the percussion works brought out the elemental fierceness of the chamber music.

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Rouse's music slips easily among contrasting elements: passages of such sudden softness that they are barely audible in the wake of a fortissimo, triads that emerge ghost-like out of chromatic dissonance and then dissolve, moments of stillness that explode into sudden rapid movement. Perhaps some of these shifts inspired the concert's title, "Transfiguration," which is the same as the Calder Quartet's new recording featuring Rouse's first two string quartets and "Compline."

Rouse's background as a percussionist shows in his rhythmic and coloristic creativity. "Ku-Ka-Ilimoku" (1978), for four percussionists, opened the program, and "Ogoun Badagris," written in 1976 for five percussionists, closed it. The Yale Percussion Group played with verve, exulting in the music's power and brutality.

The Calder Quartet (Benjamin Jacobson, and Andrew Bulbrook, violins; Jonathan Moerschel, viola; and Eric Byers, cello) plays with assurance, focus, and guts. In the elegaic String Quartet No. 2, they carefully drew the listener into the work's reflective, restless, and searing landscapes.

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The tight, high-energy performance of "Compline" offered a different mood. Rouse describes the piece as "a souvenir of my 1989 trip to Rome, a city I fell in love with instantly." Hypnotic motives evoke the sound of bells, around which other colorful impressions of Rome rise in celebration. For this septet, the Calders were joined by the committed, lively playing of flutist Tara O'Connor, clarinetist Michael Byerly, and harpist Bridget Kibbey.

It was curious that the printed program's detailed biography of Rouse described several of his works but none of the pieces on that evening's program, particularly when the composer has made those notes available online.





Rouse believes the Third String Quartet "to be my most challenging and uncompromising work to date." With this piece, he wanted to create "a succession of extremely convulsive and unpredictable gestures rendered by the players in rhythmic unison — that is, these complex rhythms would have to be performed totally together by the four players: no small feat."

In the breathtaking premiere of this daunting piece, the Calder Quartet showed the qualities that earned it a recent ASCP Adventurous Programming Award. The ensemble played with utter focus and precision, rendering the music's every fitful turn. The work builds its rhythmic complexity into an outrageous density of texture — and abruptly ends.

The concert wasn't even over yet, but the audience rose to its feet for the exhilarating performance of a challenging and absorbing new work.

The exuberant violence of the percussion quintet "Ogoun Badagris" proved a fitting conclusion to the concert.

During the fervent applause and final bows, the most colorful item on stage was Christopher Rouse's striped tie, bright among the blacks of his dedicated and energetic interpreters.

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