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## [Unearned Intimacy: Calder Quartet at the University of Maryland, September 20, 2009](#)

Score one for providing audiences with a chance to talk to artists after the concert is over: After the Calder Quartet played works by Stravinsky, Janacek, and Schubert at the University of Maryland’s Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, the quartet told a fair-sized group of curious stragglers in the ensuing “Talk Back” session not only that had they never played this particular program before, but that Sunday afternoon was their first time playing the Stravinsky and the Schubert in public.

Talking back, I asked whether the quartet had intended playing Janacek’s second quartet, titled “Intimate Letters,” before Schubert’s massive, enigmatic last (15th) quartet to allow the former to shed light on the latter. Andrew Bulbrook, the second violinist, said (paraphrasing) that it had seemed like an interesting idea to them and that it must have an effect for the audience. The sequencing did have an effect, but not quite enough of one to overcome a vagueness in the Schubert.

The Calderians didn’t do much of interest with Stravinsky’s Three Pieces, and actually rumbled past some of their most felicitous details. The players found firmer footing in the Janacek, written as a depiction of the elderly composer’s love letters to a much younger woman. The quartet enjoyed the frequent opportunities to lurch into various amorous extremes while still expressing the Czech flavor of the quartet’s melodies, keeping what could be abstract depictions of emotion grounded in human reality. Although they could have changed up their timbres more often, to characterize those extremes even better and to give some additional texture to Janacek’s frequent histrionics, they played with a power that would have been difficult to resist if anyone had been trying. (People who forsake a sunny, 80-degree Sunday afternoon for two windowless hours in the Gildenhorn Recital Hall have a vested interest in that concert being good.)

At intermission, I went a-wandering outside and thought about the upcoming Schubert. The 15th has always simultaneously seduced and eluded me, like trying to find a picture in the flames of a hearth fire; the flames flicker in G major, the shadows curl and vanish in G minor, neither dominating enough to establish a pervasive mood, both fragile and tremendously lovely and prone to unexpected flights. More than any other Schubert work (even the later piano sonatas), the 15th quartet’s modulations and wanderings regularly disrupt its classical equipoise, so that when it returns to its more modest thematic statements, the music feels estranged from itself. With my blood up from the Janacek, though, I expected the Calder’s Schubert 15 to give us blood and thunder, providing another window onto this work, maybe giving me a clearer view of it.

No such luck. True, the Calder performance took a capital-R Romantic view of the quartet, with the various eruptions emphasized, and in this the Schubert shared something with the Janacek heard before intermission. (In [his review](#), Robert Battey disputes the idea that some of these eruptions are in the score as such, and I certainly would yield to his expertise on that one.) But the transitions between minor and major felt no less

inscrutable than usual, and the Calder couldn't sustain the tension generated by those eruptions over the rambling lengths of the quartet in any coherent way. A lot of it felt under-considered and half-baked — not what I would have expected after hearing the Janacek. Only the Scherzo caught fire.

In other “Talk Back”-imparted news, the Calder planned to go straight to the airport after the concert and then to prepare for several other concerts featuring entirely new repertoire, so the relentless churn will continue. Nevertheless, juxtaposing the Janacek and Schubert could illuminate both works, and I hope they'll try it again, but they'll need to think harder about the Schubert in order for it to work in the way they (and I) hoped it would.

## **NOTHIN' BUT A G MAJOR/G MINOR THANG, BABY**

Robert Battey certainly knows a lot more about string quartet playing and repertoire than I do, but I'm pretty sure I know a lot more about West Coast rap than he does, so I am going to take issue with this statement in his review:

[The Calder Quartet's] members still exude a callow hipness; [their MySpace page](#) lists “tupac, bob dylan, sun tzu, john milton, marvin gaye, sam cooke, frank sinatra, bill evans, snoop dogg, dr dre” as among their influences.

From where I sit, that's a pretty strong list of influences. Not a dog (apart from Snoop) among them. (I suppose the quartet's USC birthplace explains why there is no love for the East Coast.) Battey also did not note that listed first among the quartet's influences are the following:

budapest, amadeus, alban berg, emerson, kronos, guarneri, takacs, tokyo, juilliard string quartets.  
schubert, beethoven, mozart, haydn, ravel, debussy, bartok, shostakovich, terry riley, philip glass, fred frith, thomas ades.....

After that illustrious and unimpeachable list, we happen upon the list of pop musicians. Does it really exude “callow hipness” to acknowledge that one listens to/enjoys/learns something from pop music? I will consider this question while playing [Raekwon's “Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...”](#) really loud, and I invite readers to do the same.

No, I don't think so. But at the very least, readers can go to the MySpace page and draw their own conclusions. (I have to admit to being intrigued about whatever it is they're going to do with Andrew W.K...)

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## **2 Comments on “Unearned Intimacy: Calder Quartet at the University of Maryland, September 20, 2009”**

1.  *mlaffs* Says:

[September 23, 2009 at 1:30 am](#)

“With my blood was up from the Janacek” needs some attention.

[Reply](#)

o  *Andrew Lindemann Malone* Says:

[September 23, 2009 at 1:34 am](#)

Whoops, yeah. Fixed.

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