

The Boston Globe

Shanghai Quartet shines on

By David Weininger

JUNE 23, 2014

ROCKPORT — In some quarters, one can detect a quiet condescension toward the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki for having turned his back on his futuristic works of the 1950s and '60s and embraced a more traditional aesthetic. But this superficial judgment crumbles on listening closely to some of Penderecki's post-avant-garde works, especially the chamber music written since the 1990s.

Consider his Third String Quartet, "Leaves of an Unwritten Diary," which the Shanghai Quartet commissioned, premiered in 2008, and played on Saturday in the first of two concerts at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival. Its sections are tonally centered and melodically rich. So, sure, call it conservative. But its textures — now caustic and astringent, now dense and motoric — are more internally varied than in most of Penderecki's earlier works, and the economical use of thematic material is masterfully hidden beneath jagged surfaces. Innovation is not so simple a matter.

A vivid and assured performance of the Penderecki was the centerpiece of the Shanghai's beautifully structured program. It was preceded by another piece with which the quartet has long experience: Zhou Long's "Song of the Ch'in," which takes the sound of an ancient Chinese zither and disperses it among the quartet's instruments. This produces an intoxicating array of sonic effects, but the piece also needs a mixture of space and rhythmic acuity, and this the Shanghai provided with intuitive precision.

Bookending these recent works were two Viennese classics: Schubert's "Quartettsatz" and Beethoven's "Razumovsky" Quartet in C major (Op. 59, No. 3). Both performances were muscular — lean into the rhythms, dig into the strings — and impressive, though the Schubert got off to a somewhat rough start. Slowish tempos in the first two movements of the Beethoven gave the piece the pleasantly labyrinthine feel of a real voyage.

The Shalin Liu Performance Center's crystalline acoustic allowed one to hear how distinct the Shanghai's four voices are. Violist Honggang Li was its magnetic pole, while cellist Nicholas Tzavaras has a broad, almost soloistic tone: During his pizzicatos in the Andante of the Beethoven he seemed to change the color of his playing three or four times in a single phrase. The high-wire finale of that piece provided fewer moment-to-moment thrills than some other groups have given it but built to an exciting finish. Tranquillity was restored by the arrangement, by second violinist Yi-Weng Jiang, of a Chinese folk song, which the quartet played as an encore.

David Weininger can be reached at globeclassicalnotes@gmail.com.