

The Boston Globe

The Borromeo Quartet savors extremes at Rockport

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JUNE 15, 2014

Most artists can go to extremes when needed; then there are those who seem to positively thrive there — Caravaggio, Almodóvar, Nirvana. The Borromeo Quartet, too, on their Thursday concert at Rockport Music (the group's 19th annual visit, according to Rockport director David Deveau), displayed their partiality to the tail end of the expressive bell curve.

The concert's first half — Maurice Ravel's lean, lithe, Sonata for Violin and Cello and Béla Bartók's formally fierce String Quartet no. 4 — provided a bounty of shouts and murmurs. The normally debonair Ravel's Sonata bristles with unusual dissonance; violinist Nicholas Kitchen and cellist Yeesun Kim made sure those dissonances buzzed and stung. Bartók's Quartet is that composer at his most angular; Kitchen and Kim, joined by violinist Kristopher Tong and violist Mai Motobuchi, sharpened the angles to acute points. Both pieces were rendered with close-up immediacy, every color concentrated, every dynamic magnified, every effect heightened.

It could have been too much, except for two other qualities: the care with which the players parsed details, and the precision with which they hit their marks. Every musical twist and turn received its attentive due; to listen to Kim, for instance, sculpt Ravel's phrases, assaying each passing inflection, was to hear how the piece uses the back-and-forth between major- and minor-scale implications to build up expressive gravity. The players' ability to lock into fully realized moods fueled the Bartók — the dangerously rustling clusters in the slow movement, or the soft scurrying of an all-pizzicato scherzo, the pitches peeking through a scrim of gently percussive noise.

After intermission, cellist (and former New England Conservatory president) Laurence Lesser joined the quartet for Franz Schubert's late, lavish C-major Quintet (D. 958). Here it was the music's expansiveness that was boosted: the opening movement generously unhurried; the Andante sostenuto trio of the Scherzo practically another slow movement; even the finale, a rustic stretch of hoofing foreshadowing Bartók's ethnomusicological bent, yielding opportunities for expressive lingering.

What was especially interesting was how Lesser — in both the independence of his part and his rounder, more mellow tone — alternated between being a sympathetically immoderate confederate and a gracefully moderating foil to the others. Multiple passages found the quartet engaged in some complex weave of counterpoint or harmony while Lesser provided the anchor of a simpler, eloquent pattern or line. In a way, it was additional amplification: an extra layer of contrast for a group that relishes it.