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Rockport raises the curtain on its 33d season

By Jeremy Eichler



The Emerson Quartet — (from left) Eugene Drucker, Philip Setzer, Paul Watkins, and Lawrence Dutton — performed on opening night at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival.

Rockport— Back in 2010 when Rockport Music opened its striking new seaside concert hall, the festival was eager to take its new space for a spin. And so the first few seasons brought fresh quantities of early music, new music, and medieval music. Even chamber opera and Baroque violinists dressed as pirates.

This summer, Rockport's 33d, artistic director David Deveau is emphasizing a return to the festival's roots, and more specifically, a focus on string quartets. The Borromeo, Parker, Shanghai, and Calder Quartets are set to appear, with recitalists and other visiting ensembles sprinkled among them. The festival's first two concerts this weekend set the season's pattern in place, with the Emerson Quartet appearing at Friday's opening night, followed by an evening with violinist Stefan Jackiw and pianist Anna Polonsky.

For its part, the Emerson in recent months has been an ensemble in transition, growing into its first personnel change in over three decades (cellist Paul Watkins has replaced David Finckel), while keeping up a very full touring schedule. This Rockport debut was sandwiched between trips to South America and Japan.

I wish I could describe Friday's concert as a shining example of the new Emerson at full strength, but when judged against its own high standards, this was not in truth the quartet's most impressive showing. Neither work on this brief program was delivered with the meticulous focus and well-honed power this ensemble is so capable of summoning. In Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" in particular, the full drama of this blockbuster score was left a few notches under-realized, and the technical execution was surprisingly uneven. It was also hard not to notice that,

after many years of performing with three of its members standing, a gesture easily read as a kind of claim to unconventional vigor, the Emerson played on Friday in the standard seated position.

Before the Schubert came Shostakovich's bleak and death-haunted Thirteenth Quartet. Violist Lawrence Dutton met its particular challenges with eloquence and poise, and Watkins's tone was rich and darkly refulgent. But a final degree of collective ensemble investment seemed elusive, perhaps in part because circumstances at the hall seemed to conspire against an atmosphere of concentration, the fierce quiet this music often generates and demands. Program books kept dropping noisily in the hall. Doors opened and closed during pianissimos. And, it must be said, those lavish views of Sandy Bay on a postcard-perfect evening do not sit easily with this particular score, its Brezhnev-era dissonances and its spectral wooden raps, the sounds of a composer's soul in multiple stages of eclipse. To say a piece of music transcends the circumstances of its birth, as Shostakovich's late quartets surely do, is not the same as saying they are equally at home in every habitat.

Fortunately, and presciently, the designers of Rockport's hall equipped it with sliding panels that can fully cover its large stage windows, making for a more concentrated listening experience as well as, it turns out, superior acoustics. The hall was placed in this latter configuration for the second half of Jackiw's superb recital on Saturday night.

Recitals can sometimes be too much about the recitalist. Or to put it another way, the most technically brilliant soloists sometimes convey the limits of their own art by rendering a program of wonderfully distinct works with an oppressive air of sameness. But what was special on Saturday were the paradoxical ways in which music-making of real self-possession and interiority was placed at the service of fantasy and imagination. Each work was allowed to live and breathe on its own terms, with Jackiw and Polonsky creating four strikingly individualized worlds of tone, color, and expression.

There was nothing superficially decorous about the opening Mozart Violin Sonata (K. 378), notable here for a naturalness of pacing, and a sense of glide and lift in Jackiw's sound. Lutoslawski's Partita for Violin and Piano was marked by razor-sharp contrasts and playing of scorching intensity. Kaijia Saariaho's Nocturne (written in Lutoslawski's memory) was performed in near-complete darkness, and showed Jackiw alert to the quiet radiance beneath the surface of the music's calm. And Brahms's D-Minor Sonata, connected without pause from the Saariaho, seemed to glow from somewhere behind the notes, as the violinist displayed an uncommonly visceral identification with the passionate sweep of this music, what it is actually trying to say.

Notable here, as throughout the night, was Polonsky's lithely articulate work at the piano, and the deeper musical chemistry this pair seem to enjoy. After the Brahms, the crowd's approval was swift and loudly voiced. But this duo gave the refreshing impression that they had been playing, first and foremost, for themselves.