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MUSIC REVIEW

An American portrait in disparate voices

A Far Cry returned to the Rockport Chamber Music Festival with works by Golijov, Montgomery, Becenti, and Dvorak.

By **Jeremy Eichler** Globe Staff, Updated July 7, 2023, 3:30 p.m.

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Members of the chamber orchestra A Far Cry performing at Rockport's Shalin Liu Performance Center on Thursday night. COURTESY OF ROCKPORT MUSIC

ROCKPORT — Could a chamber orchestra serve as a laboratory for a healthy democracy? It seems an unlikely prospect though a tempting one to contemplate, especially when the democracy in question (ours) appears at times to be on life support, and the chamber orchestra in question is Boston's own A Far Cry.

This much-admired ensemble (whose new season was [just announced](#)) functions without the ministrations of a conductor, which means its musicians have a lot of practice in one-person-one-vote approaches to problem-solving. It also means, as one member explained from the stage of the Shalin Liu Performance Center Thursday night, the group has been drawn over time to many programs exploring the *idea* of America. The latest program in this vein features works by an Argentine immigrant to America (Osvaldo Golijov); a New York-based composer (Jessie Montgomery) reflecting on the national anthem; and an autobiographical new work by Juantio Becenti, who lives in New Mexico and was born on the Navajo Nation.

Such was the stimulating first half of A Far Cry's performance, presented here as part of the fifth and final week of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival (though two additional "Annex" performances will extend the festivities into August). Golijov was represented by an arrangement of his evocative movement "Arum dem Fayer" ("Around the Fire") from his 2020 string quartet "Um Día Bom." The movement subtly interweaves echoes of a traditional Yiddish song with Schubertian motifs. Montgomery's "Banner," from 2014, ingeniously casts a string quartet as the individual "soloist" both vigorously supported by and at times vigorously challenged by the collective in the form of the chamber orchestra. And Becenti's 2022 work "The Glittering World" (heard here with violinist Alex Fortes as soloist) is a fascinating, eclectic, and ultimately deeply personal take on the Navajo creation myth.

True to form, A Far Cry's performances drew strength from its alchemical wedding of typically opposing forces: pinpoint ensemble precision and intense expressive commitment. The same could be said for the group's involving account of Dvorak's beloved "American" String Quartet, offered in the ensemble's own deft arrangement to close the program.

According to Rockport's artistic director Barry Shiffman, ticket sales this summer are surpassing pre-pandemic levels, which is an exceedingly rare accomplishment — and at the same time, with evenings as thoughtfully conceived and vibrantly executed as this one, not entirely surprising. The festival continues this weekend with a Saturday recital by violinist Paul Huang and pianist Roman Rabinovich and an all-Schubert program on Sunday featuring the "Arpeggione" Sonata and the composer's celebrated Octet.