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AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES
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MUSIC

Converting a Reluctant Composer:

The Calder Quartet and Christopher Rouse's String Quartet No. 3

by Frank J. Oteri

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The June calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

If ever there were a composer for whom more always means more, it's Christopher Rouse. His voluminous output of orchestral music, chock-full of massive brass and percussion, always makes for a powerful and exhilarating audience experience, even if some passages seem deafeningly loud. Some years back, a member of an orchestra playing one of Rouse's compositions actually filed a formal complaint about its putative damaging effects.

People who have heard only Rouse's over-the-top orchestrations might find it hard to imagine that he has also composed music for an ensemble as intimate as the string quartet. Rouse himself has frequently claimed that chamber music is not his *métier*: "My music tends to go for the big sound and the big gesture. As a result, chamber music is less of a natural habitat for me."

Yet over the years, Rouse has created an impressive, if minuscule, chamber repertoire, including not only a brass quintet and three works for percussion ensemble (perhaps no great shock) but also a Duo for Violin and Harpsichord, two mixed Septets, and two hefty String Quartets. And those lucky enough to have attended the ensemble showcases at Chamber Music America's 2007 National Conference were probably surprised to hear Rouse's String Quartet No. 2, a work composed twenty years earlier, in which extended passages are both extremely slow and extremely quiet. Despite the non-stop hustle and bustle typically associated with CMA's high-energy conference, this passionate music so affected the people in the room that you could hear a pin drop. The ensemble whose engrossing performance brought out the deep pathos of this work—an *hommage* to Shostakovich that Rouse had composed for the Cleveland Quartet after he returned from the former Soviet Union—is the southern California-based Calder Quartet. The foursome will be premiering Rouse's String Quartet No. 3 at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven on June 18.

The Calder's involvement with Rouse's music began when they were introduced to the composer at the Aspen Music Festival in 2002. With musical interests ranging from Schubert to indie rock, the four were already big fans of Rouse's orchestral works. They immediately asked Rouse for recommendations of quartets by living composers—not realizing that he had actually composed two himself. They also didn't know that Rouse, unsatisfied with the performances of those works, was determined never to write for the medium again. Excited to learn of the two already-existing compositions, the young musicians began what would turn into a long-term collaboration and a formidable challenge for both composer and ensemble.

As violinist Andrew Bulbrook remembers, “We were all in our early 20s when we started deeply working with this amazing living composer, and that really changed the way we approach all printed music. Much as the printed page is a guide, the direct interaction of working with a composer gives you much more.”

Their time with Rouse made the Calders all the more eager to have him write a work expressly for them; but this was not something they were confident about asking him for quite a while—especially since he wasn’t at all encouraging. According to Bulbrook, “Over the years, as we were studying the [earlier] quartets with him, he’d always say to us that people were wondering when the next quartet was coming. And a lot of great quartets were asking him if he was interested in writing another. But his reaction was always, ‘I can’t write for the string quartet because I need to have a bass drum!’”

But the Calders persevered. First they mastered the broad emotional canvas of Rouse’s second quartet—the one they performed at the CMA conference. Eventually they built up the stamina to take on String Quartet No. 1, a ferocious Bartók-on-steroids score from 1982, whose searing intensity was in part triggered, Rouse has written, by his reaction to the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat.

The first quartet is perhaps the loudest and most demanding 17 minutes of music ever created for four unamplified string instruments. Calder violist Jonathan Moerschel, who likes to build gadgets, came up with a contraption to help the quartet tackle the forbidding tempos. It was basically a suction-cup telephone pickup that senses electro-magnetic waves. “It works really well on a metronome,” says Moerschel. “You plug it into a stereo or a boombox, and then essentially you can make your metronome as loud as you possibly could. I don’t know how we would have learned the piece without it, because it’s so fast

and so loud all the time. But the metronome doesn’t lie, it doesn’t move, and it doesn’t change.” The Calders used the device to rehearse large sections of the piece. “It really solidified our unified rhythms,” Moerschel reports. “A lot of contemporary music is just problem-solving, and figuring out an organized way to learn it.”

Having mastered the rhythmic intricacies of the piece, the Calders encountered a different problem in performance. “I would break nearly a quarter of my bow hairs pretty much every time we performed it,”

“They’re such a terrific group, both musically and personally. They play my first two quartets with such vigor and understanding that I could hardly say no to writing them one of their own.”

As it turns out, Rouse later confessed to the Calders that certain ideas in expressed in the new work had been spinning around in his head for years and could only have been realized through the stripped-down and concentrated forces of a string quartet. The particular challenges of String Quartet No. 3, which is loaded with very fast rhy-

BENJAMIN JACOBSON CONTEMPLATES HIS ROUSE-MANGLED BOW.

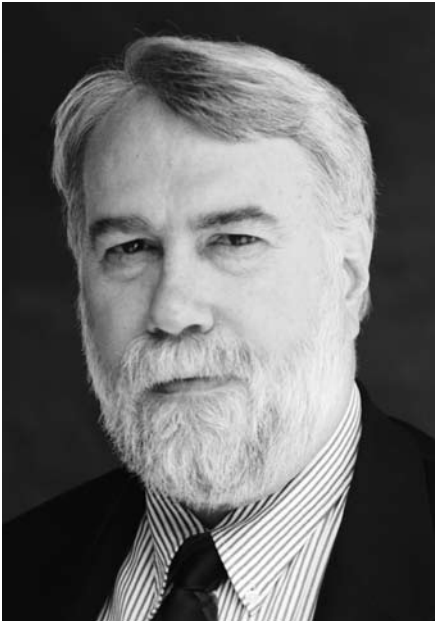


says violinist Benjamin Jacobson. “And [later] when we recorded it, maybe I put a little too much muscle into it at that point, and it [the bow] just exploded.” Jacobson decided to follow Rouse’s advice “to start using more of a ‘junk bow’” and to bring a spare, “because it’s just really loud and fast playing for 99 percent of the first quartet.”

Because of the Calders’ tireless advocacy of Rouse’s two previously orphaned quartets—as well as his significantly sunnier 1996 septet, *Compline*, which adds a flute, clarinet, and harp to the mix—Rouse finally relented and agreed to write for them:

thmic unisons, many with asymmetrical syncopations, could probably only be adequately achieved by a small, simpatico group such as the Calders—who’ve never had a personnel change in their decade of existence.

“They’re the first quartet who have really mastered my first essay in the medium,” beams Rouse. “It, too, is full of tricky rhythms and employs a lot of homophony. It’s a piece that other groups have approximated—sometimes quite convincingly—but not mastered. The Calders have completely conquered it!”



CHRISTOPHER ROUSE

Rouse explains that the Calder commission gave him the opportunity to write a kind of music that is more complex and technically challenging than works he might compose for a large ensemble such as an orchestra. Of course, an orchestra—which typically gives a new work just two rehearsals—could never match the dedication of the Calders, who will wind up putting more than 200 hours into learning the new work, not to mention the years they have already spent familiarizing themselves with every nuance of Chris’s musical language.

“With the Rouse quartets, you can’t just work on your part and have three rehearsals and then have it learned,” acknowledges Moerschel. “You have to learn it through muscle memory—a lot of individual repetitions and then repeating things together so you get a shared sense of rhythm, and then you gradually build it up. The great thing about doing it that way is that once we learned it, it stuck.”

The Calder Quartet’s commitment to this repertoire not only won over the composer, but also Mary Lou Aleskie, executive director of the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, who was so wowed by their performances that she organized the co-commission of the new work with, in addition to the Calders, Carnegie Hall, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and

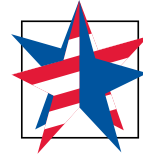
La Jolla Music Society. Chamber Music America supported the Calders’ endeavor with a Classical Commissioning grant.

“Supporting this commission was irresistible,” says Aleskie, who got to know the Calders and see their commitment to Chris’s work during her earlier tenure as executive director at La Jolla Music Society. In addition to financial support, the International Festival for Arts & Ideas offered coaching and advice on applying for grants and on pursuing other organizational partners for the commission. “The most fun,” says Aleskie, “has been envisioning the context for the concert activity around the premiere. This has been a project of the heart for all of us.”

Aleskie and the Calder’s cellist, Eric Byers, decided to transform the premiere into something larger and co-programmed a two-day Christopher Rouse celebration. After all, a premiere of a new chamber work by Chris Rouse doesn’t happen very often. One of the two concerts in *The Rouse Effect: The Next Generation* will be devoted to music by three of Rouse’s most successful former students—Kevin Puts, Michael Torke, and Marc Mellits—and performed by flutist Tara O’Connor, clarinetist Michael Byerly, the trio Real Quiet, and the Calder’s two violinists. And the concert in which String Quartet No. 3 will premiere will be an all-Rouse chamber music program, featuring the Calders with O’Connor, Byerly, and harpist Bridget Kibbey (joining them for *Compline*), plus the Yale Percussion Group. Altogether it’s quite a change of pace from a standard string quartet evening.

Byers explains, “In putting together the program, I kept thinking about Chris saying the quartet doesn’t have a bass drum. I was thinking of that almost as a source of frustration. There’s an amount of aggression that you can make real with a quartet, but then it only has a certain range in terms of actual sound. So the percussion pieces will unleash a certain amount of energy. There’ll be some all-out rage and the other stuff is a little more pent up.”

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AMERICAN
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Performances
in June

JUNE 18 New Haven, CT

PRESENTER: **International Festival of Arts & Ideas**

PROGRAM: *The Rouse Effect: The Next Generation*: String Quartet No. 3, and other chamber music by Christopher Rouse ARTISTS: Calder Quartet (Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violins; Jonathan Moerschel, viola; Eric Byers, cello); Tara O’Connor, flute; Michael Byerly, clarinet; Bridget Kibbey, harp; and the Yale Percussion Group www.artidea.org

JUNE 19 New Haven, CT

PRESENTER: **International Festival of Arts & Ideas**

PROGRAM: *The Rouse Effect: The Next Generation Works* Works by Marc Mellits, Kevin Puts and Michael Torke (all former Rouse students) ARTISTS: Real Quiet (David Cossin, percussion; Felix Fan, cello; and Andrew Russo, piano) and Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook, violins www.artidea.org

Meantime, a tremendous studio recording documenting the Calder Quartet’s performances of the first two string quartets plus *Compline* was recently released on CD by E1 Music (formerly known as Koch International Classics). Listeners will still have to wait to hear a commercial recording of String Quartet No. 3. And if the Calders plan to eventually record the 20-minute work as part of a second all-Rouse disc, they might have to wait a very long time.

“To be honest, I had a terribly difficult time with this piece,” Rouse confesses. “I really did feel like a fish out of water, this being the first chamber work I’d composed since 1996 and only the second since 1988. And so while I’ll never say ‘never,’ I wouldn’t be surprised if this turned out to be my last chamber score.”

New York-based composer and music journalist Frank J. Oteri is the Composer Advocate of the American Music Center and the Founding Editor of its web magazine, NewMusicBox www.newmusicbox.org.