

String quartet's 'experiment' worth the risks in concert

WEEKEND: REVIEW

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Ethel performs at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts.

Photo credit: Patrick Ryan

The string quartet Ethel champions new music, and, appropriately, the group's program Saturday night at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts consisted mainly of works by living composers.

Marcelo Zarvos' "Arrival" opened the concert. Indebted to the minimalist works of Philip Glass, the piece required the ensemble to ride a propulsive rhythm, and the players did so with steady timing and clear articulation.

Two Ethel originals followed. Cellist Dorothy Lawson's "Chai" was about as close as a string quartet can get to bluesy rock, and the musicians alternated between percussive thwaps on their instruments and wailing solos reminiscent of guitarist Carlos Santana's lead style. Violinist Cornelius Dufallo's "Lighthouse" bounced between a fusion jazz section à la Grover Washington Jr. and a much more exciting subsection that sounded like a cloudburst.

Violinist Mary Rowell's arrangement of jazz pianist Lennie Tristano's "Requiem" was haunting in its ensemble passages, and Rowell's

lead break called to mind the playing of Stephane Grappelli.

Ethel's minimalism became a little tiresome, however, on Amy Kohn's "Cereza," a programmatic piece intended to evoke the sound of wind moving through cherry trees. Instead, it sounded like a string quartet moving through a mediocre, unengaging piece of new music.

"Blue on Black," a work by Navajo Kevin Crank, played on the composer's love of heavy metal. Its riffs and harmonies were somewhat effective but would have sounded better played by the electric guitarists of Slayer or Metallica.

A rainbow inspired "Kahealani," a Hawaiian piece by Jeff Peterson. The descriptive quality of the music was apt only in the sense that it was lovely for a few moments but lacked any real depth. Randall Woolf's "Try to Believe" included a prerecorded track containing a trite drum machine loop and the sound of a scratchy old record. It was a poor attempt at making classical music appear up to date by commandeering ideas from hip-hop. Perhaps it was there to distract attention from the weaknesses in the score, which was more humdrum minimalism.

Anna Clyne's revelatory "Roulette," however, made up for these missteps. It also employed a taped track, which included low drones, swishing sounds, and something akin to asthmatic breathing. The odd musique concrète worked well to bolster Ethel's hovering, mesmerizing harmonies and frenetic, jarring flurries of notes. This was new music at its most riveting.

Ethel thrives on chance-taking, and the quartet acquitted itself impressively overall. Experimentation is bound to produce some clunkers, but the payoff was well worth the risk.