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The Pacifica Quartet Interprets Composers' 'Last Words'



From left, Simin Ganatra, Sibbi Bernhardsson, Masumi Per Rostad and Brandon Vamos at the 92nd Street Y on Wednesday.
Credit: Richard Termine for The New York Times

By Vivien Schweitzer
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[...] Mr. Carter's String Quartet seemed a fitting inclusion on the Pacifica Quartet's program on Wednesday evening at the 92nd Street Y. Called "Last Words," it featured the final string quartets written by Beethoven, Carter and Janacek.

As the violinist Sibbi Bernhardsson said while introducing the lineup, in Janacek's "Intimate Letters" Quartet, you can discern a "tormented soul," whereas in Beethoven's String Quartet No. 16, it seems as if the composer had "come to terms with his own fate."

In the fifth quartet by Mr. Carter, an uncompromising composer of complex, modernist music, there is perhaps a mellowing of temperament, although certainly not of intellectual heft. The challenges for performers of the work are substantial, said Mr. Bernhardsson, explaining that because of the complex rhythmic divisions, the musicians spent "hours trying to play perfectly not together."

Their efforts paid off in an engrossing, characterful performance of the dozen short movements, in which brash dissonances are playfully contrasted with emotive outbursts and lyrical interludes. The high harmonics of the Adagio sereno unfolded with a luminescent tranquillity. The otherworldly character of Mr. Carter's two "Fragments" for string quartet, written in the 1990s, was illuminated with similar delicacy.

Janacek wrote his tumultuous "Intimate Letters" at 74 (a few months before he died) as a love letter to the much younger married woman with whom he was infatuated. The performance highlighted the remarkable expressive range and tonal beauty of this ensemble, enhanced throughout by the violist Masumi Per Rostad's burnished sound and the cellist Brandon Vamos's glowing timbre.

The work's turbulent mood is a striking contrast to Beethoven's sunny F major Quartet (Op. 135), whose opening movement the group rendered with a buoyant charm enhanced by the elegant playing of Simin Ganatra, the first violinist. Their alluring sound proved breathtaking in the poignant "Lento assai," which unfolded with spine-tingling intensity.