

Lifestyle

Review: Cypress String Quartet

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Newburgh — The Cypress String Quartet, founded in 1996, has played worldwide and resides in San Francisco; they came to St. Mary's Church in Newburgh for a Sunday afternoon concert that awed and inspired the appreciative audience. The youthful group, made up of violinists Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violist Ethan Filner and cellist Jennifer Kloetzel, demonstrated formidable skills and heartfelt ensemble interpretations in a richly varied program sponsored by Newburgh Chamber Music.

The concert began with a little-known piece by an obscure American composer, Charles Thomson Griffes, "Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes," written in 1919, a year before his death at 35. The first sketch is based on a "Farewell Song of the Chippewa Indians." High plaintive notes, singing and sad, slow and deeply resonant, recall the nostalgic theme of the native voices, the exquisite strings answered by the drumlike pizzicato of the cello. The second section takes the form of a fast-paced dance that whips to an emphatic, timely close.

George Tsontakis, composer-in-residence at Bard College, was on hand to introduce his own work, String Quartet No. 5 "In Memoriam: George Rochberg," written in 2006 for his mentor and commissioned by the Cypress Quartet. In two parts, the first is full-bodied and bold with a clearly defined falling and rising melody that develops in ear-piercing upper octaves and low cello chords. The second section is atonal and searching through repeated trills in high registers that dissolve into dissonance and end in mid-measure. It's a dramatic work whose difficulties the quartet has mastered and solved.

After intermission, Beethoven's String Quartet in B-Flat, one of his last quartets, offered another kind of challenge to the players, technical and soulful. In six movements rather than the usual four, the introduction calls for an adagio that shifts to rapid passages, from meditation to enthusiastic response. The middle alternates between two fast and two slow movements, to close with a whirlwind finale. From a skipping presto and harmonic andante, the quartet moves into a lovely melodic dance, "alla danza tedesca," and a hymnlike "cavatina" that comes straight from the heart to the heart. The finale leaps and romps to a breathlessly polyphonic climax that the quartet executed to perfection.