

Cypress Quartet delights audience at Arts Center

By Lynn Bailey
Special to the ICO

Sunday marked the fifth time the Cypress String Quartet has delighted Gualala Arts Chamber Music Series audiences.

Violinists Cecily Ward and Tom Stone, violist Ethan Filner and cellist Jennifer Kloetzel performed their 2012 "Call and Response" program, titled *The Masters: Tradition, Rebellion, and Innovation* to an appreciative audience that clung to every note and nuance with rapt attention.

Each year for more than a decade, Cypress has expanded the chamber music repertoire and sparked the imagination of music lovers, including dozens of school age audiences in their educational outreach program, by identifying works of the masters linked by a theme as the "call" and commissioning a "response" from a prominent contemporary composer.

This year's call was provided by Haydn's *1772 String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 20, No. 1* and the first of Beethoven's "Late Quartets" written in the last years of his life, *String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 127*. Both works are lyrical, groundbreaking compositions. Separated by approximately 50 years, each created a revolution in the way subsequent composers wrote for the four part string ensemble.

For 2012, the Cypress Quartet commissioned French composer Philippe

Hersant, widely known in Europe and becoming known in the United States for his own innovative approaches to tonal lyricism in a broad range of symphonic, operatic, sacred and chamber works, to respond to Haydn and Beethoven. The world premiere of Hersant's *String Quartet No. 3*, representing his return to this medium in after a hiatus of more than 20 years, occurred at San Francisco's Herbst Theater with the composer in attendance just two nights before the Gualala performance.

Many musical ensembles claim a "signature sound," but with Cypress that signature was apparent in the first few measures of the Haydn and carried through every movement on the program. Three signature elements stood out.

First, and this was obvious from the first notes, Cypress Quartet members bring not only superb musicianship and sense of ensemble to the performance, they bring also extraordinarily fine instruments, including 17th and early 18th century violins and cello by Stradivarius, Bergonzi, and Amati, and a 1947 viola by Vittorio Bellarosa, one of the finest string craftsmen of the last century. The resonance was breathtaking.

Second, Cypress consciously builds its ensemble sound "from the bottom register up," a pyramidal structure of
*See Quartet...
Continued on Page 23*

Quartet... from Page 11

sonority which acknowledges the physics of musical overtones by blending a larger cello sound (not larger in loudness but in sheer quantity of resonance) with sound layers from the viola, second violin, and first violin which are in ascending pyramidal proportion.

Third, the dynamic ranges, particularly in the fugal passages of the Haydn first and last movements, and the playful syncopations of the Minuet, were executed with a perceptible extra degree of precision and emphasis that engaged the ear in a way that was striking and fresh, as if Haydn himself were in the room inspiring a first performance of the work in 1772.

Cypress did a superlative job of showcasing aspects of Haydn's work which changed the way composers wrote for string quartet — including imitative passages pitting first violin and viola in octaves against second violin and cello, also in octaves, assigning the second theme of the opening movement to the high register of the

cello rather than to the violin as was traditional, disguising the boundaries between development and recapitulation with typical Haydnesque tongue-in-cheek humor, writing a Minuet for (literally) three instruments rather than four, and keeping the audience on seat's edge in the Finale with a seemingly endless succession of mischievous syncopations.

The Beethoven quartet, in the same key and 50 years farther down the timeline from Haydn, is equally iconoclastic and new, bringing sounds and structures to the genre not heard before and treating the four instruments as true equals in the musical conversation.

These late compositions of Beethoven are often thought to correspond in mood to the stormy countenance of the composer so often rendered in portraiture, but this "first of the late quartets" is richly lyrical and gorgeously melodic, especially in second movement Adagio where a theme reminiscent of passages from his *Missa Solemnis* is rendered in a series of exquisite variations by Ward, Stone, Fil-

ner and Kloetzel, weaving the theme into solos, paired dialogues and full ensemble sections.

The Finale demonstrates a wide range of new devices, techniques, and sonorities with which Beethoven broke with the traditional structure of the string quartet while keeping a clear sense of rootedness with references to folk- and dance-like melodies throughout. The Cypress Quartet brought the audience to its feet in a rare pre-intermission standing ovation.

The second half of the program featured Philippe Hersant's response to the call of Haydn and Beethoven, in the form of his *String Quartet No. 3*. Hersant, though contemporary, writes in a lyrical, tonal style, with fleeting references to the lush harmonic devices of impressionism.

In this work he sets himself apart from other 20th and 21st century string quartet composers in a variety of ways, yet shows links to the past in his use of folk-like themes reminiscent of Russia and eastern Europe in

*See Quartet...
Continued on Page 24*

Quartet... from Page 23

the medium length first movement, Mahleresque instrumental devices (like the bugle calls found in his symphonies) in the very short second movement, and wild abandon to rhapsody in the longer, virtuosic third movement.

With the final notes of this captivating composition and this superlative performance by the Cypress Quartet, the audience rose instantly in another enthusiastic standing ovation.