

“Oshtali: Music for String Quartet” = Works by Chickasaw Student Composers – Ethel \ Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate, percussion and piano – Thunderbird Records

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This recording has received an unusual amount of critical buzz over the summer. That may be surprising for an offering by a tiny independent label, but given the unconventional nature of the project and the high quality of the results, it's not so unusual after all. Much credit for the enterprise must go to Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, composer-in-residence for the Chickasaw Nation and the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy, where the works on this disc were conceived and written. But credit where credit is due: the fifteen students who contributed their energies and talents deserve all praise as well for works that so well represent their individual tastes and predilections that this is a CD with almost as much variety as there are contributors.

To address reservations right up front, some of the slower music does seem to traverse similar compositional ground. Toward the end of the disc, I got a serious sense of déjà-vu. Maybe that's inevitable given the fact that the basic medium is the string quartet augmented very occasionally by piano or percussion. The best way to savor the disc is to sample it a few compositions at a time.

But now I can go on to the virtues of the enterprise. If you think that young composers will always try to recreate in classical guise the music of one or other of the dueling divas of the age, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, or some other contemporary pop icon, you're in for a surprise. Nothing on the current disc takes such an easy way out, though each piece undoubtedly represents some connection to music that's important to the individual composer.

So we start off with *Fantasia*, a very strong piece by Joseph Cruise Berry, composition student at Oklahoma City University. Its obsessive rhythms and repetition of a brief thematic cell call to mind Steve Reich or Terry Riley. But then there is that slow section which, as the composer states, “changes into a vaporous and unsettling mood, featuring clustered harmonics and static gestures.” This is clearly music with a bigger compositional horizon than might initially seem apparent.

Want contrast? Try high school senior (at least when the piece was written) John McAlester’s *Concerto for Strings*. Mr. McAlester tells us that the piece is inspired by what he listens to, mainly music from the late-Romantic period, such as Mahler symphonies. Mahler doesn’t come to mind as I listen to the *Concerto*, but Puccini and Elgar do. And from a constructional standpoint, I think of Sibelius: the theme of the piece emerges only from a series of fragments announced at the beginning, a central technique of Sibelius’ music making. In fact, initially I was disappointed in the end of the piece, expecting a return to the opening. Instead, Mr. McAlester changes the character of the theme entirely from slow and ruminative to jaunty and upbeat. I guess I expected an ABA structure here. But like Baroque composers and that maverick Sibelius in his *Third Symphony* and *Night Ride and Sunrise*, Mr. McAlester gives us an intriguingly unresolved bipartite structure.

Contrast again. Ryan Lee May’s *Solo* is an exercise in shifting harmony. It’s arrestingly complex; no need to fret that it began life as a guitar composition. (Mr. May is studying classical guitar at the Classen School of Advanced Studies). It sounds just right played by the string quartet, a notoriously difficult combination to write for.

Just so, *ENOUGH* by Courtney Parchcorn seems particularly conceived to translate emotional states to the quartet medium, with its pained dissonances, knife-edged double-stops, and queasy harmonics.

Nor is native musical reference slighted. Amanda Shackelford’s *The River of Our Time* is a tough rhythmically alive little tone poem that takes as its reference point a painting by the composer’s sister. The painting, *Turtle Rising*, portrays the suppression of the Chickasaw culture in the past and its eventual reestablishment today. Ms. Shackelford contributes some of the most vital and interesting work to this enterprise.

The performances by Ethel are all right on target. Obviously, the New York–based group supports the project wholeheartedly. The fact that Ethel is called, in the notes to this recording, a “postclassical quartet” is somewhat disconcerting, however. I guess I’ll have to get used to the fact that I’m a musical fossil living in a postclassical era. Can I still sneak some Beethoven onto the CD player, though?

Anyway, most of the composers on the current disc controvert the idea that we’re living in a postclassical era. And I hope to hear more from some of these fine, young, classical composers in the future.