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 UPCOMING EVENTS
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IN: REVIEWS

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* with One of Beethoven's

by LEE EISEMAN



Mountain view from last night's auditorium (BMInt staff photo)

It is a brave classical-music impresario who invites a rural New Hampshire audience to a program including a single string quartet preceded by a 25-minute lecture and followed by a 70-minute poetry reading. Yet the concept of tethering the poetry of T. S. Eliot to the music of L. v. Beethoven had enough box-office potential to elicit a feature article from *The Boston Globe* yesterday, as well as to fill the Crotched Mountain Rehabilitation Center in Greenfield, NH, last night. Electric Earth's artistic directors Jonathan Bagg and Laura Gilbert invited the Chiara String Quartet to perform Beethoven's String Quartet no. 13 in B-flat Major, op. 130, as something of an aperitif to George D. Gopen's dramatic reading of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

The evening began with Gopen's 20-minute manifesto on the inevitability of his musical and poetic pairing. This ran counter to my belief as a presenter, that one should not justify or explain what one is about to present. The copious program notes should have sufficed. Yet one did take away a sense of how one might want to listen to this poetry recitation — as rhythm and music — letting the individual words take on meaning only through future readings. One also had one's expectations primed to anticipate Eliot's gleanings from the late Beethoven's power and modernity.

By the time the Chiara String Quartet took to the stage I was expecting transcendental drama. But as a natural skeptic, I was also aware that the attractive auditorium, with a glass wall admitting a fine view of Crotched Mountain, was also an anechoic space. Aside from the glass wall and tile floor, every surface was covered in absorbent material. This was excellent for the amplified lecture by Gopen, but presaged a dry night for musicians.

Opus 130 opened with almost Haynesque geniality. There was continuous vibrato and a *gemütlich* indulgence for slides. It seemed as if the Chiara intended to sneak up on the deepest moments in the piece in order to make the familiar *Great Fuge*, op. 133 — the work's last movement — shocking and new. Indeed, the first three movements sang and danced with surprising lightness. The Cavatina fourth movement was presented in hushed tones, in order, I assumed, to set up a traversal of Beethoven's penultimate string quartet opus as

something of a life-enhancing summation.

Probably in large part because of the inadequacies of the venue, the performance of op. 133 sounded scrawny and undramatic, very unlike the excellent work I have heard from the Chiara in the past. There wasn't enough power, the tuning wasn't precise, and the ensemble wasn't always very clean. Such inadequacies can sometimes be forgiven in an exciting performance, but this one had little compensating sense of drive or destination.

Coupling music with oration is hardly a novel construct. One can recall melodramas of Beethoven and Liszt, performances of Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* preceded by the Richard Dehmel poem which inspired it, as well as such fine rarities as Brahms's song cycle, *Die schöne Magelone*, op.33, which is best offered as a tapestry alternating songs with readings from the poet/dramatist Ludwig Tieck. I recently presented a very compelling performance by the Leipzig String Quartet that included staged enactments from "Adrian Leverkühn's Testament" from Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* alternating with musical works such as the first movement from Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" quartet, the *Dankgesang* movement of Beethoven's op. 132, as well as movements by Cage, Webern, and Adorno. The memory of that performance raised my expectations for last night's.

When I first read about the Gopen/Chiara collaboration of words and music, I expected that Beethoven would be interspersed with Eliot in some synergistic and inevitable sounding mix. When I later learned that the quartet and poetic readings would be separated by an intermission, I began to doubt whether either work would inform or add value to the other. The Chiara's playing had not left me with any strong yearning for a poetry reading. Nor did the subsequent reading ameliorate my disappointment in the musical performance.

I leave the formal exegesis on Eliot's poems and the appropriateness of pairing them with a particular Beethoven quartet to my esteemed and learned colleague, *BMInt* reviewer Cashman Kerr Prince. His essay in the form of a consideration of Gopen's program notes appears [here](#).

I am very happy to report that George D. Gopen, professor emeritus of the Practice of Rhetoric at Duke University, gave a very fine reading. His expressive vocabulary was large. His musically modulated voice covered a wide pitch range. His enunciation was quite clear with all the necessary glottal stops and other such rhetorical devices. The combination of his theatrical inflections and rhythmic sensitivity did give a fine sense of musical form and served to emphasize the larger themes of death and rebirth that recurred in a variety of iterations throughout the poems. Though Gopen had little opportunity to impersonate multiple characters as some do in such recitations, he did employ a distinct vocal styling for his characterization of the ghost in the second movement of the fourth poem.

Gopen has been reading and teaching these poems for a great many years. His dedication and immersion have allowed him get beyond a mere recitation, rising last night to a canonic dramatization that places him in the company of great actors such as Claude Rains.

An excerpt from the Claude Rains performance with pianist Glenn Gould of Richard Strauss's melodramatically accompanied version of Tennyson's Enoch Arden can be heard [HERE](#) . It's surely some sort of an apotheosis of poetry and music.

Lee Eiseman is the publisher of the *Intelligencer*.

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Surely the oddest thing is the choice of quartet?

It was the Op. 132 in A Minor which is always linked to Four Quartets. It was while listening to the latter that Eliot wrote to Spender, "There is a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human, gaiety about some of [Beethoven's] later things, which one

imagines might come to oneself as the fruits of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die.”

Strange to have chosen an earlier quartet for this event!

Comment by [Tiresias](#) — August 3, 2012 at 9:51 am

I was “ticked off” by the very first sentence of Lee Eiseman’s review of Electric Earth’s program featuring the T.S. Eliot/Beethoven connection.

May I suggest that you not stoop to patronize the “rural” folks in southwestern NH. If you would attend more venues, you might be surprised at the level of intellectual/musical fervor among the back country folk, not all of whom are Boston transplants.

You might also learn to have more empathy for the impresarios who must find places to present programs out here in the wilds, while still operating on a shoestring. They have brought us world class music, including a full house of elderly folk on the hottest night of this scorching summer—with no air conditioning—at Jaffrey Center Meetinghouse. We get it out here!

P.M. Clark

Comment by [P.M. Clark](#) — August 6, 2012 at 8:58 am