

Pacifica Quartet with pianist Ursula Oppens

Pacifica Quartet, Oppens do Baker proud

By **ANDREW ADLER** • April 27, 2004

aadler@courier-journal.com

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It's been 16 years since Claude Baker's piano quintet "Tableaux Funebres" has been heard in Louisville, which is far too long an interval for a score of this caliber.

But Sunday night, the piece returned to the University of Louisville School of Music, where Baker taught before moving on to professional relationships with the St. Louis Symphony and the Indiana University School of Music, where he now teaches.

Baker must have been pleased with the account of "Tableaux Funebres" given Sunday by the Pacifica Quartet and pianist Ursula Oppens. He'd withdrawn the quintet soon after its original Louisville performance, recrafting portions of the piece when an opportunity for another presentation here came up — courtesy of the Chamber Music Society. Fuller and richer than ever, it made a welcome focal point to the CMS' season-ending concert with the Pacifica.

I admired "Tableaux Funebres" when it was played here in 1988, though Sunday's account may well have trumped the earlier effort in sheer volcanic energy. Melding a quartet like the Pacifica with a pianist like Oppens provides the best of all possible interpretive worlds for a contemporary score. No grudging once-over for these performers — they lit into the piece as utterly committed collaborative artists.

Baker employs several intriguing literary and musical connections in the four-movement score. Each movement springs out of a bit of Japanese haiku, a seasonal cycle of moods and allusions, further amplified by quotations from Mahler, Stravinsky, Schubert and Richard Strauss. Structural boundaries are clear; the momentum vivid.

Always fluent in this kind of material, Oppens was a masterly translator of Baker's evocative writing for the piano. Reaching inside the instrument to strum, pluck or otherwise manipulate the strings — or to percussively tap its wooden frame — are by no means new techniques. Still, they remain outside the realm of most listeners' experiences, and in Sunday's performance the alternative sound palette carried unmistakable drama.

The Pacifica's members — violinists Simin Ganatra and Sibbi Bernhardsson, violist Masumi Per Rostad and cellist Brandon Vamos — suggested both the precision and expansiveness of Baker's music. There is often a sensation of insistent mystery to the composer's scheme, and in summoning up that indefinable element the Pacifica and Oppens did it full, fascinating justice.

An earlier account of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1 began rather loosely, then gathered itself together in a performance of fleet brilliance. The evening closed with Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44, which elicited a reading of almost oceanic proportions. This was the sort of presentation that makes you say, "I don't care how many times the Schumann piano quintet has been played — I want to hear it *this way*."

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

Tel: 212.757.0782 • Fax: 212.541.5179

E: nycolbert@colbertartists.com

Web: <http://www.colbertartists.com>