

## Imperfect Fifths

### Sirius Quartet @ The Cell, NYC

Alan Blattberg | October 21, 2013

There's been a small, steadily-smoldering movement underfoot over the last three-or-so decades, of composers and performers dedicated to demonstrating how classical music can move not only head and heart, but also fists and unmentionables.

Last Saturday night, Tribeca New Music pursued their noble mission—*viz.*, bridging the gap between 'classical' and 'popular' musics, and filling the public's ears with beautiful music penned by still-breathing composers—by bringing four of them to The Cell Theatre in Chelsea.

Currently at the head (or, perhaps, some other extremity) of this critical movement is the Sirius Quartet, named appropriately after the brightest star in the night sky (technically it's a binary star system, but you know...), not to mention one that has stirred up a fair amount of interest and controversy over the decades.

From 1985 to 1995, violist Ron Lawrence played in the Soldier String Quartet, arguably the first of the latter-day "rock star" string quartets (the Ardittis played some unquestionably bold and progressive modern material as far back as '74, but the Soldiers put out on SST Records, so that's where my vote goes). They referred to themselves, back in the day, as "the Ramones of classical music." He has played, over the years, with a staggering array of new music heavyweights including John Zorn, John Luther Adams, John Cale, near-John Jonas Hellborg, and non-Johns Anthony Braxton, James "Blood" Ulmer, Elliot Sharp, Phill Niblock, Mary Rowell, Nick Didkovsky, Robert Dick, Elodie Lauten, Leroy Jenkins, and Newband (though, as far as I know, he has not yet worked with Dave Soldier's precocious pachyderm protégés).

Violinist Gregor Huebner is an extraordinary performer (and a none-too-shabby composer), who leverages simultaneously the classical master's rigor, the jazzman's improv lexicon, and the Eastern European gypsy's fire. The first time I saw him play was some years ago at Birdland, NYC, in the Richie Beirach Quintet (with Randy Brecker, George Mraz und Billy Hart), and he held his own (hell, he flat-out shone) even in such esteemed company.

Violinist Fung Chern Hwei is a speed demon. Ysaÿe via Vai. He definitely brings **The Rock** to the group, spending a lot of his time in fifth gear, and we are all better for it.

In the hands of 'cellist Jeremy Harman, the instrument sings, it cries, it wails. It also pounds, throbs and propels the group across sometimes calm, sometimes raging, sometimes deeply polymetric/polyrhythmic seas.

All four do a tremendous job of taking traditional classical instruments, presenting them in a traditional classical grouping, and smashing any extant preconceptions of classical music being fusty, pompous, antediluvian, high-brow elitist entertainment for the blue-haired bourgeois (which it isn't, but opportunities to pigeonhole abound). They make everyone rock. Get up and dance with your bad selves...

For nearly two hours, the group dazzled the packed house with virtuosic, rock-inflected, jazz-grounded, classical-minded polyglot music that was by turns lilting and churning, diaphanous and crushing, placid and rhythmic, soothing and fiery... and always compelling and *always* exhilarating.