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## A Quartet's Tempting Tasting Menu



Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

From left, in a Merkin Hall concert by the Lark Quartet: Maria Bachmann, Deborah Buck, Yousif Sheronick (percussionist), Astrid Schween, Kathryn Lockwood and the composer Daniel Bernard Roumain.

By STEVE SMITH

New York Times

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Most chamber music concerts present audience members with a light appetizer, a contrasting dish and a main course. The Lark Quartet served that much on the first half of its program on Sunday night at Merkin Concert Hall, albeit in reduced portions. The second half was effectively the dessert tray.

The quartet was celebrating the release of a new CD, and the evening's menu included all of that disc's contents. First, as on the CD, was the Scherzo movement from Peter Schickele's String Quartet No. 2, "In Memoriam." The composer celebrated a relative's sense of humor in this movement, with lithe melodies and dizzying unison passages. A quotation from Haydn's "Lark" Quartet acknowledged this ensemble, which commissioned the piece.

In lieu of extensive program notes, the group invited the composers present to introduce their own pieces. Paul Moravec said his "Atmosfera a Villa Aurelia" was a reminiscence of Rome. A brief, arc-shaped meditation, the work included an ardent central passage in keening tones.

Daniel Bernard Roumain had audience members clap in rhythm to convey the spirit of his String Quartet No. 5, "Rosa Parks." The Lark Quartet reordered the movements, opening with the charged centerpiece, "I Made Up My Mind Not to Move." The hushed, austere finale, "Isorhythmiclationalistic," was followed by "Klap Ur Handz," the buoyant introductory movement, which was augmented by the percussionist Yousif Sheronick's improvised accompaniment.

After intermission came another piece by Mr. Moravec, "Vince & Jan: 1945." It was inspired by a photograph of the composer's parents and was based on a passage from the wartime chestnut "I'll Be Seeing You." (Singing a few bars to

illustrate, Mr. Moravec seemed delighted when most of the audience joined in.) This masterly miniature conveyed warm nostalgia, buoyant swing and wartime unease.

Five songs by George Gershwin, in elegant arrangements by Stanley Silverman, exhausted the material from the CD. But there was a bonus track, and a remix at that: a songful, muscular account of “Federico II” by the Italian composer Giovanni Sollima, to which Mr. Sheronick added dazzling improvisations.

<http://www.nytimes.com/>

## Lark Ascending

### The Lark Quartet rocks the house with a tour-de-force performance

By Daniel Felsenfeld

On stage Reviews

Strings Magazine February 2007

It is little wonder that the Lark Quartet, quick on its way to becoming one of the premiere “edgy” ensembles, takes to music that blurs the boundaries between concert and pop fare because it functions like a rock band. Whereas many a quartet aims to be a potent singular instrument (the Emerson and Juilliard and Kronos quartets come to mind), some are a concatenation of distinct personalities (Ethel, perhaps) that coalesce into one. The Lark’s November 19 concert at Merkin Concert Hall in New York City underscored this fact.

The forthright first violinist, Maria Bachmann, is clearly the group’s leader, with a sexy soloist’s approach to her chair, nicely paired with the energetic ballast of Deborah Buck, whose incisive second fiddle comes off like a rhythm guitar. Balanced by Kathryn Lockwood’s full viola tone (a keyboardist?) and Astrid Schween’s assured, silken cello (the rhythm section), the Lark is a force-of-personality quartet, a force to be reckoned with.

Their most recent CD, *Klap Ur Handz*, is a tantalizing mix of pieces, all of which were represented at this concert. At first it seemed an odd grouping; Pulitzer-Prize-winning composer Paul Moravec’s delicate neo-classicisms against the iconoclastic Daniel Bernard Roumain’s crossovers; P.D.Q. Bach (in his more serious role as proper composer Peter Schickele) with Gershwin. Yet it was a thoughtful, intelligently planned evening of music, with enough variety to satisfy any populations: those who seek only the lyrical or the danceable or the old, you were not wanted here; the Larks, in keeping with its members’ personalities, like to mix it up.

Schickele’s Scherzo movement from his Second String Quartet – a self-declared “triple espresso” – commenced the running of the style gamut, ranging from the delicate fripperies of a waltz to the theme song to the 1960’s Batman action series, and much in between. The two Moravec pieces on the concert – *Atmosfera a Villa Aurelia* (an arrangement of a string trio written in praise of Rome) and *Vince & Jan*, composed for the now-defunct Elements Quartet’s “Snapshots” project – were studies in single-mood delicacy. The Larks settled here into their role as a “proper” quartet, not feeling the need to do anything other than play these beautiful pieces straight, to heartbreaking effect.

Roumain – or DBR as he is known – is a self-declared polyglot, striving to mix many styles (jazz, hip-hip, funk, “classical”) into a musical stew, usually (but not always) written for standard chamber ensembles. His String Quartet No. 5, written as part of his series of chamber homages to Black luminaries, is about Civil Rights icon Rosa Parks. It does not lack for energy and it is idiomatically wrought for the instruments (Roumain is quite the violinist), giving the Larks plenty of material to chew on. For the final movement, the titular “*Klap Ur Handz*,” the group was joined by wonder percussionist Yousif Sheronick, who made the final push as spirited as DBR no doubt intended. Stanley Silverman’s arrangements of Gershwin tunes – “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Sweet and Low Down,” and “Clap Yo’ Handz” among them – were intended as concert overtures, which explains their effectiveness: they all end with a bang! As a complete set, it tired only slightly – though the material is so excellent (and the arrangements so skilled) that it was only a minor complaint in an otherwise thoroughly enjoyable suite. Gershwin, this many years on, still captivates and surprises.

The concert closed with a real barnburner, Giovanni Sollima’s “Federico II” from *Viaggio in Italia*, a moto-perpetuo work that had the crowd on its feet. This was the perfect Lark closer: it mixed many cultures, allowed the quartet to display with perfect clarity the distinct personalities drawn into a single inexorable spirit, and aimed to rock the house, a task in which it succeeded deftly.

Any complaints as the music’s sameness, its lack of harmonic motion, its relentlessness, were drowned out by the rollicking enthusiasm of both audience and quartet.

# Lark Quartet, Making Music As Glorious as All Outdoors

By Tim Page

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, November 15, 2005; Page C05

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>

You needed an awfully good reason to stay inside on such a lovely afternoon as Sunday's, but the Lark Quartet provided one with its free concert at the National Academy of Sciences. This polished and warmly communicative ensemble played works ranging from Beethoven to George Gershwin and didn't miss a step.

The Lark Quartet has undergone a number of personnel changes since it was founded 20 years ago and currently consists of violinists Maria Bachmann and Deborah Buck, violist Kathryn Lockwood and cellist Astrid Schween. Bachmann also maintains a solo career, yet there is no "first among equals" grandstanding when she is working with the Lark. (The late Jascha Heifetz's chamber performances often sounded like disappointed violin concertos.) To the contrary: Even though the NAS hall has rather dry and unforgiving acoustics (high notes, in particular, were uncomfortably exposed), the four women played with an organlike euphony, as though they all shared the same musical impulses and understandings and were having a great deal of fun together.

Beethoven's String Quartet in D, Op. 18, No. 3, opened the program, an early work played for once with an emphasis on melody and comfortable good spirits rather than perceived prefigurations of the "heaven-storming" romantic the composer would become. A selection of late-20th-century ragtime by William Bolcom followed, music influenced by the spirit of Scott Joplin yet suffused with Bolcom's own allusive sense of humor. The "Three Rags for String Quartet" - "Poltergeist," "Graceful Ghost" and "Incineratorag" -- were created for piano but translate easily and well for strings.

Stanley Silverman's arrangements of "Five Songs for String Quartet" by George Gershwin followed immediately and seemingly inevitably. This sort of crossover is usually not my thing -- in general, I'd rather hear pop songs played by pop musicians, who usually do them better -- but Silverman's renditions were so deft and sympathetic and the Lark's performances so smart and urgent that the hybrid took. "Do It Again" bubbled up with Dvoraklike schmaltz while "Sweet and Lowdown" swung out with such vigor and strength that the quartet sounded like a jazz orchestra in full sway.

Ravel's wonderful Quartet in F -- a collection of four musical prisms that constantly change their hues and designs -- closed the afternoon. Simultaneously tidy and exuberant, coolly cosmopolitan and deeply sentimental, it might have been written for the Lark players, who gave it a performance of grace, proportion and burnished brilliance.

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## FANFARE MAGAZINE REVIEW

Robert Carl

KLAP UR HANDZ • Lark Str Qrt; Yousif Sheronick (perc)1 • ENDEAVOUR 1018 (60:45)

SCHICKELE String Quartet No. 2, "In Memoriam": Scherzo. MORAVEC Atmosfera a Villa Aurelia. Vince & Jan: 1945. GERSHWIN (arr. Silverman) Funny Face: He Loves and She Loves. Lady, Be Good: Fascinat' Rhythm. French Doll: Do It Again. Clap Your Hands. Tip-toes: Sweet and Low-Down. ROUMAIN String Quartet No. 5, "Rosa Parks." Klap Ur Handz REMIX1

This is the sort of programming a lot of groups are currently doing, mixing up styles and periods, but all with a tilt toward popular American musical traditions. It distinguishes itself from the pack, though, by both a certain savviness of programming, and fabulous performance.

The programming shows a lot of interconnections from one piece to another. Both Peter Schickele and Paul Moravec work with a language that references American lyrical streams, basically Copland and Barber, respectively. Both, however, sound quite authentic, not mere knockoffs of the sources. We're getting to the point where we can start to hear Schickele as the serious composer he always was, despite the commercial success of his alter ego, P.D.Q. Bach. The only thing remotely 18th century about his Scherzo is a moment of clumping Haydnesque wit, but otherwise it's full of hoedown energy (happily similar to the fire that powers the first movement of the Roumain). Moravec is a composer who's never hid his Romantic temperament, and these two tone poems are two of his most affecting essays.

Atmosfera a Villa Aureila has the richly perfumed sound one associates with both Griffes and Respighi, while Vince & Jan is a tribute to the composer's parents, a heartbreaking ode using the song I'll be Seeing You in All the Old Familiar Places as its cantus (incidentally, it's inspired by a WW II photograph of the couple, and having seen it, I can attest that the resemblance between father and son is uncanny). I particularly liked these pieces because their open, less-structured form allows the composer's natural lyricism to come through even more strongly than in some of his larger-scale, more abstract works.

From 21st-century composers who reference the early/mid 20th, we move back to the historical period. The Gershwin arrangements by Stanley Silverman are sophisticated, witty, and can get down and dirty, too. That latter quality is enhanced by the Lark's sound, which can really dig into the bluesy qualities of the songs. Simultaneously they can make the melodies really "sing"; I've been a particular fan of Maria Bachmann's playing for years, and she can get a dark mezzo-ish sound from her fiddle that grabs your attention immediately.

One of the Gershwin songs is Clap Your Hands, and the first movement of Daniel Bernard Roumain's fifth quartet is titled "Klap Ur Handz," in good hip-hop respelling. Throwing himself right into the current sonic maelstrom, Roumain is a multitalented musician (composer, violinist, street pedagogue, arranger, and DJ—he seems to be everywhere in New York right now, with his trademark dreadlocks). He's a force of nature for sure, and this quartet is rather typical of the sort of classical music lots of folks are writing right now, referencing various sorts of roots traditions. What sets it apart is the seriousness of purpose it projects. The first and second movements (the latter, the Rosa Parks tribute) both rely on ostinatos to propel them, but Roumain tends to favor the passacaglia, which, with its bass-driven cycle, gives more latitude for variety above. As a result, the music's materials are varied subtly and continuously, growing to real, not forced, climaxes that carry emotional weight. And the piece has the advantage of a serene, soft, slow third movement as an epilogue to the sound and fury. The "remix" basically consists of the first movement with rhythm tracks added, I suspect in hopes that it might work its way into some further airplay and dance floor use.

Hip, but not painfully so. The Larks have good taste in both their collaborators, the works they choose, and integrity with which they program. This is a satisfying program that should play well to any audience.

#### **FANFARE: Robert Carl**

National Public Radio

"All Things Considered" performing music of DBR:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5191628>

"Performance Today" performing music of William Bolcom:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5162536>

"Performance Today" performing music of George Gershwin:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5150548>

The Lark unsheathed a glittering array of timbres...they are women of extraordinary ability.

—*The Washington Post*

The Lark Quartet convincingly showed that grace lyricism and sense of order...were what the composer valued most highly in the end.

—*The Los Angeles Times*

Dynamic, accomplished and imaginative musicians.

—*The Boston Globe*

Those who were not completely overwhelmed by the world-class level of the Lark Quartet, should have become so during the performance.

—*Main-Post, Germany*

The foursome played the Brahms and Schubert as if they were new, and the Kouneva as if it were an old friend.

—*Arizona Republic*

No place is too remote or unlikely for the four women to draw parallels between life and music, be it at a retirement home, physics class or a concert for community members in general.

—*Southeast Ohio Magazine*

What [The Lark Quartet] convey in terms of sound and style betrays none of the urban-aggressive stance assumed by many of their young peers. [They] convincingly showed that grace, lyricism and a sense of order, were what

[Beethoven] valued most highly at the end.  
—*The Los Angeles Times*

The Lark's very individual performances are beautifully conceived and depend on the group's singer-like sense of instrumental coloration.  
—*Audio*