

St. Lawrence String Quartet: Hard-Driving Intensity, a Soulful Golijov 'Premiere' in Birmingham

By Michael Huebner

Calling Osvaldo Golijov's "Kohelet" a world premiere Tuesday at Brock Recital Hall may have been stretching a point.

Although St. Lawrence String Quartet violinist Geoff Nuttall declared it such, only about eight minutes of the planned 30-minute work was complete, so they played what they could. It was understandable, considering the perfectionist Argentine composer's reputation for lateness. Before they started, Nuttall admitted on stage, "I'm nervous."

He need not have been. SLSQ's exquisite rendering of the fragmentary score appealed to the spirit and spoke to the soul. Dark, rumbling arpeggios formed a backdrop, while first violinist Scott St. John soared with high, sustained tones. Soft and meditative, it is reminiscent of the holy minimalism of Henryk Gorecki, John Tavener and Arvo Part. This is inspired music, linked to the words of the son of David from the book of Ecclesiastes and the composer's Jewish heritage. It whetted the appetite for more.

The SLSQ commission was originally scheduled for a March premiere at Carnegie Hall, but has been moved to Oct. 23 in Palo Alto, Calif.

The enthusiasm and spontaneity that prompted the quartet to take on the proj-

St. Lawrence String Quartet

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Brock Recital Hall

Tuesday

Co-presented by Davis Architects

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ect were present from the start. Beginning with Prokofiev's String Quartet No. 2, the quartet played with hard-driving intensity, lunging into the work's grating dissonances, pulling back for its sweet, sometimes passionate, melodies. At times it took

a conversational tone. Christopher Costanza's singing oration in the second movement was countered with playful dialogues in the upper strings. St. John's stratospheric solo in the third movement was given a squawking retort by Nuttall.

Watching the quartet was just as absorbing as listening. -- St. John's rearing back in his chair, Nuttall's startling jumps and leg swings, cellist Christopher Costanza's crouches, smiles and grimaces, violist Lesley Robertson's steady, solid anchor. It added up to a raw, gritty sound that bristled with energy.

Beethoven's Quartet in F, Op. 59, No. 1, the first of the Razumovsky set, was stripped of its classical-era trappings. What it lacked in refinement was more than compensated in depth. Sharp contrasts, sweeping crescendos, yearning sighs and whispers left no room for stodginess. The finale, with its sudden dark-to-light shifts and shocking accents, made an ardent case for live chamber music, especially in the sonic glow of Brock Hall.

An encore, the Menuetto from Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 5 quartet, was finely chiseled and tightly controlled, bringing into sharp focus the composer's evolution from 1800 to 1805.

The concert was sponsored by arts patron Michael Freeman as a birthday gift to his wife, Mary Anne, and SLSQ got into the spirit with an impromptu rendition of "Happy Birthday" before the first Beethoven quartet.