

Los Angeles Times

Yings show off chops with Beethoven

The sibling quartet known for eclectic musical projects demonstrates its affinity for tradition.

By Richard S. Ginell, Special to The Times
January 15, 2008

The Ying Quartet has been launched into chamber music orbit -- and it's easy to see why. These four siblings know how to attract attention.

Timothy, Janet, Phillip and David Ying have been separating themselves from the pack with such offbeat projects as collaborations with the jazz-based Turtle Island String Quartet, folk musician Mike Seeger and future-shock electronics wiz Tod Machover.

Their new album, "Dim Sum" (Telarc), due out today, is a selection of short pieces and excerpts by Chinese American composers, which they previewed recently in a local Chinese restaurant.

So how come the Yings turned up Sunday afternoon playing mostly Beethoven in the elegant,

ornately carved, shoebox-shaped Old World music room of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library? It turns out that they have played on the Chamber Music at the Clark series a number of times; they like it, and the Clark likes having them.

Operated by the UCLA Center for 17th & 18th Century Studies, Chamber Music at the Clark is starting its 14th season blissfully under the radar. It doesn't have to advertise: Each concert is an automatic sellout, and the lucky occupants of the 140 available seats are now chosen by lottery (just like the audience for the New Year's Day concert in Vienna).

The Yings sense the difference between early and late Beethoven; the Opus 18 No. 3 Quartet was impetuous and bright, while the Opus 132 Quartet found them pressing harder into the strings for a larger, broader sound.

But they have yet to find the depth within Opus 132; the climax of the expansive slow movement, for example, came

off all right yet without the ecstatic emotional power it is capable of producing. Only in the Finale did the Yings play with real abandon.

Luckily for adventure seekers, there was also a rare live cycle of the complete string quartet music of Igor Stravinsky -- all 14 minutes of it. This tiny work contains some of Stravinsky's best mordant, witty or dour material, starting with the Three Pieces for String Quartet (1914) and Concertino (1920) and leaping ahead to the Webern-drenched 1959 "Double Canon, Raoul Dufy in Memoriam" (by the time you say the title, the piece is practically over).

While the Three Pieces could have used sharper rhythms, the Yings caught the arch humor, and their tendency to push hard found a willing vehicle in the Concertino. This would make a neat Ying EP someday.

The Yings also offered a taste of "Dim Sum" as an encore: the spiky, syncopated Pizzicato for String Quartet by Vivian Fung.