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FLIP-YOUR-WIG CLASSICS, AND DIM SUM TOO

By Paul Hertelendy

BURLINGAME---How about a little dim sum with your string quartet?

The prize-winning Ying Quartet serves up both at once, without even reaching for a napkin. Their inventive “dim sum” chamber-music program serves up a variety of Chinese composers, matching the ethnicity of the family constituting the ensemble’s personnel. And they framed this with a late Haydn (Op. 77, #1) and a late Beethoven (the colossus known as Op. 132) for a formidable East-West concert in the Tudor magnificence of the Kohl Mansion.

Chou Wen-chung, the retired Columbia Univ. professor-composer, added guitar-picks to the Ying arsenal for the playing of excerpts from his “Clouds,” as he simulated the ancient Chinese psaltery known as the qin, in a love song that cut across both oceans and frontiers.

The UC San Diego professor Lei Liang paid homage to the legendary Mongolian fiddler Serashi with his “Gobi Gloria.” The quirky, almost improvisatory solo with its leaps and jumps, adroitly rendered by violinist Timothy Ying, conveys everything from galloping horses to what seemed like a lullaby.

And the most Westernized in the composers group, Vivian Fung (well-known from San Jose Chamber Orchestra performances), chipped in with a Pizzicato in which the players tapped on their instruments, as if simulating a clog dance.

These works were part of a Ying “Dim Sum” CD just released six days before the Jan. 20 concert, one of the most novel concepts in classical marketing. Said Timothy with a grin, “This is the one (region) of America where I don’t have to explain dim sum!”

The Yings are something close to paragons of perfection, playing with unbridled passion, even in the Haydn Quartet, Op. 77, No. 1, where the byword seemed to be, “Flip the wig, don’t just powder it!”

The same passion, linked with soulful music by various musicians, was even more effective in the Beethoven Op. 132, 45 minutes and five movements of fireworks and high emotion. Here the composer ascends a craggy mountain through the first half, arriving at a long, extended summit ridge, and then descends, reprising the fetching waltz-like theme of the opening movement---the only really bright light in an otherwise deep and overcast environment. To these ears, this is the ultimate string quartet experience in all late Beethoven, and in many ways the most unsettling.

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Paul Hertelendy has been covering the dance and modern-music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area with relish -- and a certain amount of salsa -- for years.