Inspirational house of mirrors
BROOKLYN RIDER, AT 10, SHOWCASES DYNAMIC, FRESH IDEAS ABOUT STRING QUARTET LIFE

By Josef Woodard, New-Press Correspondent

Review

C halk up another one for an invigorating and, in more ways than one, inspirational night in the presence of a string quartet this season. Spirits and imaginations soared, onstage and off, when the famed and infinitely adventurous string quartet Brooklyn Rider returned to the Hahn Hall last week. They dazzled the audience in this venue as part of the 2013 Music Academy of the West festival, and — in other SOS music news — were also featured at last June’s Ojai Music Festival, but the agenda was fresh this time around, as they derived into a tenth anniversary project, “Brooklyn Rider Almanac.”

Needless to say, this quartet concert model was unlike two other powerful quartet concerts in the past few months — the Danish String Quartet in November (also, like the Brooklyn Rider show, part of the UCSB Arts & Lectures much-cherished “Up Close and Musical” series), and the Juilliard Quartet’s stunning showing at the Lobero in January. Contrary to those earlier concerts, there was no Haydn or Beethoven in sight or sound at the Rider show: the “Almanac” project consists of mostly short, and shorter, commissioned works from artists in rock, jazz, new folk and, yes, classical music, drawing on the inspirations of others, whether in art, literature or music.

Thus, we got Bill Frisell’s lovely, art-folk-loopy piece “John Steinbeck” (written while at an idyllic residency in Big Sur, which produced Mr. Frisell’s masterful “Big Sur” suite, premiered at the Monterey Jazz Festival). Venezuela-born composer Gonzalo Grau channeled his love for Chick Corea in the suavely exuberant, 5/8 metetogroove of his piece “Five-Legged Cat,” and Dana Lynn’s inventively rough-and-ready “Maintenance Music” nods to the influence of vet-

cran NYC artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose art celebrates the everyday — including the untold beauty of garbage.

A high point came with contemporary jazz hero and perennial poll-winner Vijay Iyer’s tribute to James Brown, “Dig the Say,” somehow finding a crossover resonance between Brownian funk and Iyer-esque complexity.

My personal favorite of the evening was by drummer Greg Saunier from the art-punk band Deerhoof (heard in town at Velvet Jones a few years back), a tribute to noted composer/intellectual pillar Christian Wolff, “Quartet, Parts One & Two.” Clenched, buzzing, clustering chords across the group float and conspire, punctuated by pregnant silences and arhythmic tactics, in a mesmerizing fashion.

Mr. Saunier also supplied a ripe valentine to the host group in his note: “Thanks to Brooklyn Rider for always being game and sneaking classical music out of museum jail.” Hear hear, although said “jail” can be a very comforting place, too.

Speaking of innovative compositions by “rock” drummers, Glenn Kotche of the band Wilco — no stranger to experimental side projects and new music liaisons — penned the rhythmically rich and interesting, if not wholly satisfying, “Ping Pong Thaw Fumble,” a piece actually commissioned by Arts & Lectures and given its world premiere here.

In the end, the specific results vary in quality and musical worth, but the generous and genre-bound ing spirit of the whole outweighs the individual parts. Daniel Cords’ Keith Haring tribute, “The Haring Escape,” opening the concert, struck these ears as post-minimalist wallpaper. Rubin Kodheli’s “Necessary Henry!” is inspired by great jazz musician-composer-reehinker Henry Threadgill, a visionary deserving much wider recognition, but was a disappointment when listened to as a Threadgill-ian effort. The generic grooves, blues changes and a generally Jimi Hendrix-ian flavor seemed antithetical to the artistic voice of “Henry,” although some of the strange, intricate thematic lines hinted in that direction.

Things ended on a stronger note during the encore of the touching waltz “Show Me,” by singer-songwriter Aoife O’Donovan (heard at the Lobero with Crooked Still). She has intriguingly bowed to the influence of William Faulkner’s “sometimes coarse and simple” way with words, gone musical for a few enchanting and loamy minutes.

Brooklyn Rider continued redefining the string quartet at Hahn Hall.