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The New York Times

All Together Now, No Leader Needed East Coast Chamber Orchestra at Tishman Auditorium

By Zachary Woolfe, March 17, 2014

“Everything the group touched felt balanced and bright... And the orchestra, as always, play luminously.”

There is a warm glow to the sound of the East Coast Chamber Orchestra, a conductorless ensemble made up of members of a variety of American orchestras and quartets.

That tonal radiance was there throughout the wide range of repertory the orchestra played in a concert on Sunday afternoon at the New School’s Tishman Auditorium, from the noble harmonies of Gesualdo’s “Tristis Est Anima Mea” to a Mozart divertimento to work by the players’ contemporaries, including a recent commission, David Ludwig’s “Virtuosity: Five Microconcertos for String Orchestra” (2013). **Everything the group touched felt balanced and bright.**

The poise of the sound was all the more remarkable given that, of the six works, only Mr. Ludwig’s was composed for string orchestra; the others were heard in generally persuasive arrangements. Only the violinist and composer Michi Wiancko’s version of Satie’s “Gymnopédie No. 1,” originally for solo piano, seemed to gain clotted textures as it was ramped up for 18 string players.

Without the voices for which it was written, Gesualdo’s music seemed, if anything, overly polished and polite, its dissonances more distant than dangerous. The orchestra played the delicate and gauzy passages beautifully — it was impressive throughout the concert to hear so many people reduce their collective sound to a sliver — but I was left with a muted impression in a work that can terrify.

Most effective were three arrangements of works originally written for string quartet. Mozart’s Divertimento in B flat (K. 137) opened the concert with silky grace. The first movement of Ravel’s String Quartet in F, in the orchestra’s own arrangement, was as gentle and agile as the original, but was also shot through with new thickets of complexity. The meatiness of the group’s sound brought a new savagery to the second movement: Written in 1903, the work began to seem like a premonition of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” from a decade later.

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The ingratiating bustle of Judd Greenstein’s quartet “Four on the Floor” (2006) transferred well to this larger group. But it was about as bland as Mr. Ludwig’s “Virtuosity,” which sends a solo part traveling around the orchestra as it alternates benignly between frenetic and relaxed passages.

But there are piquant moments. At one point, cellos and violas whisper underneath a soulful solo cello melody, and neo-Baroque unanimity near the end dissolves into clever snaps, slaps and slides under a stern double bass solo. **And the orchestra, as always, played luminously.**