

Tashi reunion conquers 'Time'

The quartet has lost none of its magic as it performs Messiaen's work for the first time in 30 years.

By Mark Swed, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer January 29, 2008

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Ahead of the rest of us in many ways, this populist city recycles, is bicycle-friendly, promotes sustainable food, provides inexpensive public transportation and reveres chamber music. It is a town that has retained a hint of '60s idealism and is more progressive than most in its concern for the future.

So what better place than Portland's Reed College -- a hippie hotbed back in the '60s and still a somewhat free-spirited, if now academically traditional, institution -- for a reunion over the weekend of Tashi?

The group formed in 1973 when pianist Peter Serkin, violinist Ida Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman came together to play Olivier Messiaen's World War II wake-up call from the angels, "Quartet for the End of Time." The coming together of Messiaen's message and the musicians' countercultural identity was the moment when classical music finally caught up with the '60s musical revolution. Tashi, which means "good fortune" in Tibetan and was also the name of Serkin's dog, became the Beatles of chamber music.

Tashi broke down concert hall formality. Its members dressed as they liked. Their hairstyles changed frequently. And Messiaen's quartet became their calling card, which they played more than 200 times over the next four years. Their recording of it, moreover, became an instant classic.

Saturday night, when the original four members regrouped to tackle the Messiaen for the first time in 30 years, Tashi-heads braved freezing rain and ice-slicked roads to fill Reed's Kaul Auditorium, some carrying old LPs to be signed.

"Quartet for the End of Time" was the centerpiece of Chamber Music Northwest's Carter-Messiaen Project, a weekend's worth of concerts and talks. Messiaen, a Catholic mystic who died in 1992, is one of the most celebrated and influential, if strangest, French composers of the 20th century. Elliott Carter, a secular American Modernist, is still composing and is writing a piano concerto set to premiere at Carnegie Hall on Dec. 11, his 100th birthday, one day after Messiaen's.

The only thing the composers share might seem to be their birth sign -- a notion, David Schiff amusingly wrote in his eloquent program notes, that all but destroyed any faith a friend of his had in astrology. In fact, they do have similarities, especially in how they dealt with musical and philosophical time.

The original Tashi was Messiaen-centric, but Carter has been in the repertory of all four players, and Sherry today is not only one of the finest Carter players around but put together an illuminating Carter "docu-concert" with film clips that was shown Sunday afternoon.

Still, Messiaen remained the weekend's big attraction. And Saturday night brought back old times. The concert began with short, fleeting solo works by Charles Wuorinen and Carter performed by Serkin and Kavafian, along with a five-minute Carter trio, "Con Leggerezza Pensosa," for violin, cello and clarinet.

"Quartet for the End of Time," after intermission, was anything but fleeting. The years didn't entirely peel away during the next 55 minutes (nearly eight longer than the group's 1975 recording). But the Tashi magic was back.

Dressed in a carefully tailored three-piece striped suit (and one of maybe three people in the hall wearing a tie), Serkin gave every piano attack extraordinary sharpness. Meanwhile, Stoltzman, sporting a velvet jacket and band-collared shirt, offered no sense of attack at all -- the sound of his clarinet seemed to be drifting in from another galaxy. Kavafian, in glitter and satin, was the baby of the group (only 20 when it formed) and here sounded utterly alive to the sweetness of Messiaen's sonorities. Sherry, in blazer and slacks, was brilliantly rhapsodic.

But if the performance was of our time, it also went beyond time. And if the members' stylistic differences are more exaggerated than ever now that each has forged a distinguished solo career, that made the Tashi magic all the more meaningful.

Messiaen wrote the quartet under trying conditions while in a prisoner of war camp in 1941. The clarinet had worn-out pads. The piano was a mess. The cello was missing a string. And the miracle of the quartet -- in which bird song is used to represent freedom and gloriously colored harmonies the glory of infinity -- is its transcendence of time and space.

Though playing with the lid of his piano open, Serkin sensitively balanced his sound with the strings. Stoltzman can these days seem self-indulgent, and sure enough, he was in his own world in the big solo clarinet movement. But his weird playing was nonetheless remarkable and deeply moving.

Best of all was the way all four players could be themselves but also seem acutely attuned to the others. That was the old Tashi, but it is also the older, wiser, maybe a bit slower but more transcendental than ever reunited Tashi.

The group will play at Harvard and in New York in the spring, at the Ravinia and Tanglewood festivals this summer. Beyond that, Sherry says, they'll see.