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Elegant bassoons in four-part harmony

MUSIC REVIEW

CALIBAN QUARTET

Reviewed by Elissa Poole

A BASSOON quartet is, by necessity, a ruthless ransacker of the repertoires of others. Toronto's Caliban Quartet has been combatting the scarcity of bona fide repertoire by commissioning its own. Entitled Blues, Crystals, Tangos and Odes, Friday's program at Walter Hall showcased some of these new works alongside a number of attractive transcriptions ranging from Palestrina to Kurt Weill.

The concert opened with arrangements by quartet member Fraser Jackson of Josquin Desprez's *Agnus Dei* from the *Missa Pange Lingua* and Palestrina's *Veni sponso Christi*. Since this music was often performed by instruments in its own day, the transition to a consort of modern bassoons was not too wide a stretch. Indeed the ethereal quality of the descant voice was supported from below by such earthy, everyman timbres — and with such simplicity — that the interpretations were entirely convincing. No less so was Nadina Jackson's heartfelt, sputtering caricature of *Tempest* character Caliban, extracted from Ned Rorem's solo cello suite, "after reading Shakespeare."

Among the commissioned pieces, Toronto composer Chan Ka Nin's *Crystal Blue Persuasion* was animated by the same idiomatic sensitivity to colour, and the same tendency to turn individual voices into characters, which he has displayed elsewhere in compositions for Amici and oboist Lawrence Cherney. From its back-alley lyricism and bluesy cajolerie to the little chromatic glisses that nudge its so-sweet harmonies into place, the piece encourages the listener to think "sax section," though not without a few tradeoffs. Four bassoons aren't as sexy as a quartet of saxophones; but they're very elegant.

Marjan Mozetich's *Odes to America* (receiving its world premiere on Friday) rifled the American pop vocabulary in backhanded tribute. *Good Times* captured the spirit of such cultural icons as Burt Bacharach and Kellogg's commercials. *Blue Souls* was a sort of postmodern *Eleanor Rigby*, balanced between the sad-clown poignancy of its yearning treble and a precariously spare irony.

Oddly, there was too much irony, or too much good taste, in Kurt Weill's tango *Youkali*. Had the quartet been a bit more vulgar — louder, brasher, looser — this arrangement might really have sizzled.

But all in all the concert stood out for engaging programming and superlative playing; its only real miss came at the end. Carlos Rodriguez's *The Isle is Full of Noises* was a lugubrious experiment in electronic processing hampered by mud and static from a second-rate sound system. It's no wonder the group insisted on its two encores, winning back anyone hopeful of a lighter send-off with arrangements of themes from CBC's *Disc Drive* and PBS-TV's *Rumpole of the Bailey* series.