

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

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## CONCERT REVIEW: Strings, post-Experienced

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Spicing up and stretching out cultural parameters of string quartet tradition has long been a part of the Turtle Island String Quartet's agenda, going back to its origin in 1985. Generally, fans of the group, which freely incorporates arrangements of rock, jazz, folk idioms and even, yes, classical music, into its work, know what to expect. For one thing, we can expect improvisational skill and adventuring, and some clever moves in terms of programming.

But sometimes, the quartet slips into more conventional classical settings, where a program they call "Have you ever been..." as they did at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art auditorium on Sunday afternoon — might not immediately be recognized as a nod to Jimi Hendrix' axiomatic love cry, and song title "Have you ever been experienced?" By concert's end, true believers and new believers alike were likely to have had the sensation of being duly experienced, entranced by this special, culture-hopping but integrity-enriched American group.

There in the wonderful acoustically inspired ambience of the SBMA, a rare intimate setting for this popular group, the TISQ snuck a program liberally dipping into music of Hendrix and John Coltrane into the Museum's normally more down-the-middle series (a great boon to the chamber music circuit in town, by the way).

This is a group with a sterling past, future and an evolving present. Founding members David Balakrishnan, on violin, and Mark Summer, on cello, are now joined by much younger players, also dazzling and eclectic-minded in all the right ways: Danish violinist Mads Tolling and violist Jeremy Kittel. As Mr. Balakrishnan explained on Sunday, with a grin, when the group started out, the charter members were classically trained players also in love with rock and jazz and world music. Or, as he put it, "very early on, we were attracted to the dark side - now we've got these players who say 'big deal.' "

As if to illustrate the natural and mad diversity of interests and influences in this group, a high point of Sunday's performance was Balakrishnan's new, four-movement work "Tree of Life." It taps into the composer/violinist's love of Indian classical music, and opens with droning fourths like a tambura, segueing with a strange ease into an Appalachian rhythm, with a Carnatic mode in the melody. Airs of jazz, rock and assorted folk styles breeze through the score, which also allows for improvisational flexing from the players. It could be a TISQ theme song.

For the most part, though, the afternoon belonged to music of others, from "other" corners of the musical spectrum, but arranged and approached in a way that seemed perfectly suitable. They

played pieces from their Grammy-winning Coltrane tribute album, including "Resolution" from the late sax great's "A Love Supreme" album, the simmering soulful waltz take on "My Favorite Things" and a Coltrane-esque TISQ-penned tune called "Model Train" (a twist on "modal" and "Trane). Stanley Clarke's Coltrane tribute song, "Song for John," was another ripe vehicle, hinting at Coltrane's "Central Park West" and the unison lines of Chick Corea's "Spain."

Ending the first set, Coltrane's "Moment's Notice," with a noticeably impressive solo by Mr. Tolling, dealt out a maze of chord changes, whereas much of the material was more simple and modal in terms of harmonic palette.

Hendrix' world is also their world, and in a way more deeply musical and relevant than the Kronos Quartet's gimmicky salvo of "Purple Haze." The TISQ takes seriously the business of finding expressive and timbral points of contact and supernatural communication with Hendrix' vision as guitarist and songwriter, on tunes from his album "Electric Ladyland" and, for an encore, Mr. Kittel's refreshing arrangement of "Hey Joe." This "Joe" is craftily done up as a dirge, which gets excited, and then veers into a more complicated, even classical-flavored harmonic plot to finish.

So goes the TISQ musical M.O., sparkly and fresh while also sophisticated and deeply musical, and full of effective low-meets-high cultural maneuvering. To catch their intelligent act in the close-up quarters of the SBMA room only upped the ante of an altogether fine encounter, and experience.