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Concert reveals its rhyme and reason

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Wait, is that a melody? No, just a fleeting fragment. Didn't we hear that figure before? Maybe. But not in that exact form.

The sound world of Elliott Carter is not the most obvious one to navigate, but his aesthetic at least is consistent. His Oboe Quartet, played Wednesday night in a Perelman Theater concert presented by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, is populated by angry shards, seemingly scattershot sections in which the oboe, violin, viola and cello seem oblivious to one another, and high, closely spaced pitches that are painful to hear. It's hardly arbitrary, though. There's a flow, a narrative if you will, to this 20-minute work that is key to seeing purpose through the mist of unrelenting dissonance.

The emotional heart might be the brief middle section where everything suddenly becomes very sustained. The harmonic rhythm (the pace at which chords change) almost enters a state of suspended animation. And then the strings take the piece off in a completely different and very violent direction. It's impossible not to wonder if there's an extra-musical reference being evoked in this piece from 2001.

The players here, performing under the Musicians From Marlboro banner, were admirably, and often rather unbelievably, expert: oboist Rudolph Vrbsky, violinist Susie Park, violist Samuel Rhodes, and cellist Priscilla Lee.

Rhodes brought a bonus track: the local premiere of Carter's Figment IV for solo viola, a punchy work composed last year and dedicated to Rhodes by the composer (whose engagement with dissonance seems unfazed by a 100th birthday on the horizon). This Figment, perhaps five minutes long, centers on certain pitches, but none seemed like home. Playing it a second time would have been the perfect way to give this audience a listening-key for unlocking some of Carter's legendary inscrutability.

Park, Lee, Rhodes and violinist Harumi Rhodes opened with a polished and quite expressive Haydn String Quartet in D major (Op. 20, No. 4, Hob. III:34). And Lee and the two Rhodeses were joined by pianist Ieva Jokubaviciute in Schumann's Piano Quartet in E flat major (Op. 47). No one is a bigger Schumann fan than this listener, but even I had to admit this is not his most urgent or concentrated artistic statement. Still, each player, in his or her way, made a compelling argument - Lee with her probing phrasing, violinist Rhodes in some charismatic moments of triumph, and Jokubaviciute with a big personality communicated through a sound of great refinement and presence.