

# THE LAST OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER

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## Mohican tales, set to strings

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Mark Twain would have loved Friday night's concert of strings and narration in the enchanting Spanish Courtyard at Caramoor in Katonah. After all, there was a quartet by his contemporary, Brahms, some Haydn and, best of all, a raucous, knee-slapping lampoon of James Fenimore Cooper, author of "The Last of the Mohicans," whom Twain was notorious for despising.

The featured performance was the world premiere of "The Last of James Fenimore Cooper," a touché by composer Brent Michael Davids, commissioned by Caramoor for the Miro String Quartet.

Davids, a member of the Mohican Nation, explained that his narration would combine plot material from Cooper's novel, as well as a Mohican tale about a snow monster and appearances by Cooper himself.

Davids began the piece with a "Bird's Roar" by whirling a strung whistle to twittering effect. The quartet followed with a syn-copated rhythm-chorale that quickly gave way to cascades of melodic triplets coursing down through the group's registers.

A very dramatic start. In fact, very melodramatic. But that's exactly what Davids intended. He is rubbing Cooper's nose in it with this work, all the stereotypes of "injuns" the novel put forth, all the Hollywood clichés that followed.

As the narration began, the strings underscored every emotion of the text with appropriately nervous tremolos, swooning glissandos and pizzicato moments of mock panic that might have served as the sound track to a silent movie.

The audience loved it, laughing out loud at times, particularly when the string players unexpectedly broke into what sounded like a rain dance, singing "Hey ya, hi ya, hey!" or when snippets of "One little, two little, three little Indians" brazenly accentuated the narrative.

But this piece was more than just great satire and slapstick — in fact, much more. From start to finish, the string writing was wildly inventive, beautifully melodic and rhythmically surprising.

Cellist Joshua Gindele lent rich luxury to a recurring low-register melody, playing it with a wide, resonant vibrato and pitch-perfect slides, while violinists David Ching and Sandy Yamamoto created an atmospheric effect of ultra-sonic harmonics and bow scratchings that sounded like a radio caught between stations in the distance.

Mirroring his text, Davids showed great word-painting skills, making the strings bristle with the cold, or melt down in a group slide that seemed bottomless during a particularly calamitous turn in the story. Thematically, a rolling six-note figure resonated through the entire piece, building and returning, played sometimes by the entire quartet or, finally, spun out in an effortless three-measure flourish by Ching.

The piece concluded with Cooper being redeemed and forgiven

through an outlandish and hilarious series of plot twists. Then, in a bittersweet coda, Davids sang a final, mock Indian-style farewell while the strings played with complete sincerity beneath him.

Perhaps the single disappointment in this otherwise wonderful, theatrical performance was Davids' sober, glued-to-the-page delivery.

Two string quartets book-ended the premiered work. First was Haydn's D Major, Op. 50, No. 6 "The Frog."

Here, the Miro Quartet worked magic with the score's allusions to nature, breathing life into everything from wheeling birds to frogs.

And breathing was a hallmark of this ensemble all evening, particularly in the poco adagio where each pause and entrance seemed executed not by four players but one.

The concert concluded with the Brahms Quartet No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1. During the allegro, violist John Largess made clear his gift for phrasing, treating the melody to an exceptionally full and glowing tone.

The group highlight of this piece was the "Romanze: Poco Adagio," when, in rhythmic unison and a great display of dynamic range, the ensemble once again breathed together perfectly, like a choir singing sotto voce.

In the final allegro, the tuning occasionally wavered, yet this ultimate movement proved a vigorous, accelerating and satisfying close to the evening.

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