

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## Contemporary music, played with heart

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Like a breath of fresh air, the music of Aaron Jay Kernis gives life to the idea that contemporary music can resonate in the heart as well as the mind.

That was made clear when the New York-based Contrasts Quartet performed Kernis' music Saturday at Sacramento State University's Music Hall.

Kernis' music hypnotizes one moment and shocks the next. Perhaps it is this synergy of attraction and dissonance that stood Kernis well when he was awarded the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in music for his String Quartet No. 2. It certainly made this evening a winning proposition, and the masterful and bold performance by the Contrasts Quartet made it more so.

*A look at 15 years of Kernis' music began with short and intimate pieces for cello and piano. On the touching "Ballad," the music was darkly lush and tinged with a jazzy feel. Here the standout cellist Caroline Stinson revealed a clean and piquant approach, while Evelyne Luest added soulful sophistication on the piano. It was the beginning of excellent playing by both throughout the evening.*

Three fetching piano pieces followed. On "Linda's Waltz," a little Bill Evans was mixed with a dash of Schubert. On "Playing Monster," a tectonic arrangement of bold bass notes and chords proved painterly and doused with wit. In "Speed Limit Rag," Kernis channeled Gershwin and Fats Waller through a 21st century prism.

The evening's prize was the three-movement "Trio in Red." Written in 2001, it was the most robust work performed, exploring many of the conceptual and tactile outer fringes of what a clarinet and cello can do.

Clarinetist Ayako Oshima proved a stunningly fluid wind player here, her notes filled with clarity and passion. Nailing down fast and simultaneous ascending runs and selling the divide between cello and clarinet are key. And Stinson and Oshima did not disappoint.

The concert ended with "Still Movement with Hymn" from 1993, with Lisa Kim on violin. The requiem-like work mines Hebraic music and plainchant. Cloying at times, the work's color bears much heavy emotional weight. But it ends with a poetic and captivating epilogue. And that proved the perfect cap to the evening.