

Review**Linden String Quartet on Signature Series
at Lorain County Community College (October 7)**

by Nicholas Jones



Northeast Ohio – cradle of string quartets! The Linden String Quartet, which began when the players were graduate students at the Cleveland Institute of Music, have achieved a remarkable record of success in five years – topped by the gold medal at the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition in 2009 and a win at the Concert Artists Guild Victor Elmaleh Competition the next year.

On Monday, the Lindens played a full program of string quartet music as part of the Signature Series at Lorain County Community College's Stocker Center for the Arts.

Like another area quartet (the Jasper, which began at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music), the Lindens went from CIM to a two-year residency at Yale, under the guidance of the Tokyo String Quartet. They have recently returned to the Cleveland area, full of energy about programming, community outreach, and repertoire. Last spring, the Lindens inaugurated “Parallels Cleveland Chamber Series,” with the estimable project of putting Severance Hall's Reinberger Hall to its proper chamber-music use. (Read ClevelandClassical's review [here](#).)

The players, all of whom are CIM graduates, include violinists Sarah McElravy and Catherine Cosbey, violist Eric Wong, and cellist Felix Umansky.

The quartet plays with startling intensity and an energetic rhythmic cohesiveness. The exactness that is a *sine qua non* of quartet playing (unanimity of attack, phrasing, and intention) can in some groups become a goal in itself. With the Linden, I get the sense that they play precisely not for the sake of precision but because it gets them where they want to go. And they have strong ideas about where that is.

One of the strengths of the Linden is that they create a unified ensemble sound without sacrificing the individual characteristics of each player. Each of them plays at times with a soloist's presence, unafraid to dominate—even overwhelm—the texture for a moment.

With this accomplished and well-coached quartet, the result is an exciting interplay of strong and passionate voices, speaking both for themselves and for the group.

The program began with three energetic and appealing rags by Michigan composer William Bolcom, performed with humor and swing. The middle of the three, “The Graceful Ghost Rag,” written in memory of the composer's father, was especially moving, without being sentimental—one might say, “haunting.”

These folksy and eccentric rags were an appropriate introduction to the next piece, the third string quartet of Béla Bartók. This 1929 composition essentially broke the mold of the romantic string quartet with its percussive drive, unusual techniques, and intense compression. The Lindens played this seminal masterpiece with complete conviction and assuredness—yet never lost the sense that even after more than eighty years, the music still seems thrillingly new.

The first half came to a close with two gentler pieces by John Corigliano – a humorous arrangement of “A Black November Turkey,” originally written for chorus, and the moving tribute of the composer to his violinist father, “Snapshot: Circa 1909.”

The Lindens make the audience feel welcome and engaged with short introductions to each piece of music—a welcome chance to retune our ears for what's to come, and to hear from each of the players as well.

After intermission, the program closed with Mendelssohn's *Quartet in A minor, Opus 13*. It's a familiar piece that is clearly close to the hearts of the Linden players, and seems to perfectly fit their style: passionate, virtuosic, rich, and accessible. The performance (along with the verbal introduction by first violinist Sarah McElravy) emphasized the narrative quality of the work, which they see as posing an extended question about first love. Before playing the piece itself, the ensemble helpfully played the song that Mendelssohn returns to throughout the quartet, with its anguished query: “Is it true? Is it true?”

The concert was presented as a part of LCCC's admirable Signature Series. Northeast Ohio is lucky to have a community college so engaged in presenting and supporting the arts. The audience was disappointingly small, however. The choice of a Monday night surely has something to do with this (perhaps also more publicity is needed). If the series is to present concerts of this quality, they should not be hidden away on a night that most of us use to recoup from the weekend's cultural activities. The Linden—and other artists in the Signature Series—are good enough to go head-to-head with other area offerings on more audience-friendly times of the week.

Unfortunately, the next Signature Series artist, the renowned pianist André Watts, has had to postpone his planned recital for October 17 due to an injury.

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Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 8, 2013