

Arts Renaissance Tremont: Amici String Quartet (February 15)

by Daniel Hathaway



This month's Arts Renaissance Tremont concert brought the Amici String Quartet to the auditorium of Pilgrim UCC Church on Sunday afternoon, February 15, for the second performance in the group's complete cycle of Beethoven quartets. A quick calculation suggests that this project will play out over five or six seasons (16 quartets, average of three quartets per performance), depending on how the *Große Fuge* figures in.

The Amici String Quartet was founded in 1985 by four members of The Cleveland Orchestra — including violinist Takako Masame and cellist Ralph Curry. Violist Lynne Ramsey

joined the quartet in 1989, and violinist Miho Hashizume came on after joining the Orchestra in 1994. Considering their day jobs, it's impressive that orchestra members take on chamber music projects on the side, particularly such enterprises as the complete Beethoven cycle. That's a challenge for established quartets, and a true labor of love for orchestral musicians.

On Sunday, the wind chill factor plunged temperatures to an insane number of minus degrees, but ART's committed audience turned out bravely for the occasion, along with a number of Cleveland Orchestra players who were supporting their colleagues.

Following the tradition of contrasting works from Beethoven's different style periods, the Amici programmed one early (No. 2 in G, op. 18, no. 2), one middle (No. 11 in f, op. 95) and one late quartet (No. 12 in E-flat, op. 127), written respectively in 1798-1800, 1810 and 1824. Besides pointing up how the composer grew from his Haydn-influenced youth into self-confident maturity and then settled into an iconoclastic, highly experimental

“old age”, this approach inevitably leads to hearing three works of highly individual personalities.

Performing from a platform — an addition that allowed for extra resonance and projection in the carpeted space — the Amici played the G-major quartet with agreeable radiance and charm. The undeniably cute rondo tune that ends the piece made friends the first time around and never outgrew its welcome.

The f-minor quartet, dramatic in style and compact in structure, begins with an arresting unison figure that returns over and over to energize the progress of the first movement, and the affect it creates is never far away during the rest of the piece. The Amici played with verve and focus throughout. The third movement was particularly dashing in its energy and sweep.

Thrilling, resonant chords marked the beginning of the E-flat quartet, interspersed with lyrical solos. Crisp pizzicatos and clear roulades were features of the Scherzo. Only in the finale did the Amici’s focus become a bit diffuse and its intonation begin to wander. But by then the chill in the auditorium had firmly settled into the audience’s fingers and toes. You could only wonder what the players were feeling.

As a welcome addition to a series that rarely provides program notes, ART invited music critic and writer Donald Rosenberg to give a pre-concert lecture which the Amici Quartet members graciously illustrated with musical examples. Word has it that the audience loved the opportunity to delve more deeply into Beethoven’s musical world as expressed in these three contrasting quartets.

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