

Tuesday Musical: Beyond Base Four — Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble (May 5)

by Nicholas Jones



Ever since Haydn established the string quartet as the *ensemble de rigueur*, chamber music for strings has tended to operate in base four. There are many variants on the quartet (“ $4 \pm n$ ”, as a math teacher might write it), but even when you subtract a violin (Beethoven) or add a viola (Mozart), a cello (Schubert), or a double bass (Dvořák) — or, as in this concert, when you pump it up to a sextet (Brahms) or an octet (Mendelssohn,

Shostakovich) — the quartet remains the norm.

Four musicians rehearse and perform together until they know each other's moves and develop that sense of ensemble that make us feel that the four individuals have become one (think Emerson, Kronos, Budapest, Julliard Quartets). If a quartet wants to present a sextet or an octet, it invites guest performers, but they can't draw on the extended rehearsal experience of the host quartet. The result often lacks the tightness of ensemble that we expect in the quartet.

But in the case of the final program of the Tuesday Musical Concert Series — one sextet and two octets — the larger group, the Chamber Ensemble of the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, sounded as cohesive as any quartet. These eight fine string players, here for their one Midwest appearance in an eight-day tour of the United States, draw on a long history of playing the great sextets and octets together. They perform with an extraordinary sense of familiarity with each other and with the music. The St. Martin Chamber Ensemble clearly operates on base eight.

Watching them play tells us a lot about the ensemble: long passages were performed from memory, allowing the players to make eye contact, watch each other's bows, anticipate entrances, share smiles. Stretched in an arc across the stage from high to low, the ensemble used its center (from fourth violin through two violas and first cello) as a kind of anchor for the sound and the rhythm.

While the first violin (Tomo Keller), seated at the far left, was the leader, many of his cues were enacted and transmitted by first violist Robert Smissen. Sitting at the group's center, this remarkable chamber player made even the most mundane of viola "noodling" into a source of renewed energy and direction. Smissen was ably backed up by second violist Fiona Bonds. At the far right, second cellist Will Schofield contributed his powerful sound and rhythmic push, as if refueling the motor that ran at the center of the group.

Brahms's *Sextet in G* (his second, opus 36) is a rich soundscape painted in pairs of instruments — two violins, two violas, two cellos. The young composer, in love with a certain Agathe, wrote a passionate first movement, even coding the beloved's name in the melody of the lyrical second theme (gorgeously played by first cellist Stephen Orton). In typical Brahms fashion, the love theme is linked with a melancholy counter theme that encodes not "Agathe" but "Ade" — 'goodbye!' Apparently Brahms's passion, like his lifelong yearning for Clara Schumann, didn't lead to a happy consummation.

The second movement is a creepy, slithering scherzo, making it clear that love is no joke. Desire returns in the third movement, a set of variations that take a hauntingly emptied-out theme and gradually fill it with passion, ending with an oddly subdued final variation. As a finale, a bumptious "folk" tune morphs through a stirring transition on descending scales into a Mendelssohnian fugue.

Brahms was only 25 when he wrote the sextet, but Shostakovich was even younger — still in his teens — when he wrote his *Two Pieces for String Octet*, opus 11. As always with Shostakovich, personal loss (the death of a friend) is fused with national struggle (the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and the first world war dominated his early years). The first piece, "Prelude," features a passionate lament for viola (Smissen), set off against a virtuosic cadenza for the violin (Keller). The second piece is labeled "Scherzo" but conveys more angst than humor. It's a great vehicle for this octet, demanding intense concentration and ensemble. The St. Martin group created an almost heart-stopping range of sonic affects, from an odd whistle tune to a set of fierce pizzicatos, concluding with a sequence of obsessive, manically energetic tunes led by the violins (Keller, with Harvey de Souza, Jennifer Godson, and Martin Burgess).

Mendelssohn was 16 when he wrote his *Octet*, opus 20. What it lacks in introspection it makes up for in sheer brilliance. The joyful, throbbing energy of the first movement supports the first violin in swift, wavelike arpeggios that rise impetuously, one after

another, until they tumble down and begin again. In the development section, there's an astonishing sense of structure and contrast (a trick learned, surely, from the young composer's study of Beethoven). The pulsation of the main theme suddenly becomes a hushed and reverent hymn, a "Song without Words." Then the driving force of repeated sixteenth-notes scale passages (all eight players exactly in time!) pushes us ahead again to the main theme. A dazzling cadenza flourish in the first violin captures that energy. An urgent, squirrely motif tossed back and forth between the cellos signals the final return of the main theme. And all that just in the first movement!

A rich Andante follows, leading to a delicate, woodsy Scherzo, and concluding with a grand and joyous Finale, a Woodstock of youthful musical exuberance. The *Octet* is almost a violin concerto as well as a complex ensemble piece. First violinist Tomo Keller, listed in the program as "guest leader," played with precision and grace, though he could have used more volume in order to avoid being overshadowed by the sound of seven other powerful string players.

Tuesday Musical has announced its 2015-16 season, including, among others, the entire Academy of St. Martin in the Fields (led by its artistic director, violinist Joshua Bell) and a repeat appearance of the David Finkel/Wu Han/Philip Setzer trio. Despite the acoustic limitations of E. J. Thomas Hall (will they please design something to take away the curse of its cotton-wool sound that is especially detrimental to chamber music?) the Tuesday Musical series is central in the rich array of chamber presenters of Northeast Ohio.

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