

Heights Arts: Omni Quartet at Dunham Tavern Museum (Feb. 25)

by Nicholas Stevens



“Do *not* put Mozart into a box!” The plea, issued by Omni Quartet cellist Tanya Ell at the Heights Arts Close Encounters concert last weekend, could apply equally to the ensemble itself. In the barn of the Dunham Tavern Museum, the quartet demonstrated both range and focus, showing off the group’s unique sound in works by Mozart and expanding its ranks to play a sextet by Brahms.

To dispense with a primary question right away: the players in the group are, to a member, first-rate musicians on both

technical and expressive levels. The concert of February 25 brought listeners into the company of six instrumentalists who are also all members of The Cleveland Orchestra. The conditions of the performance, from performer roster and repertoire to acoustics and even natural lighting, almost guaranteed a satisfying outcome.

However, no amount of background knowledge could prepare the listener for the remarkable musicality of the quartet in performances of Mozart’s *Adagio and Fugue in c* and *Quartet in G*. From a severe opening statement to a melting subsequent passage, the players showed striking unity of vision in the titular Adagio of the first piece. A lesser ensemble might treat the Fugue as the sort of labored, cerebral exercise that so many music students come to dread — yet the quartet proved to be not only a well-oiled machine, but also profoundly expressive in its approach to the movement’s every twist, turn, tune, and countermelody. Not mechanical but ferociously alive, the ensemble

rendered this opening Mozart composition with an organic, responsive, and often athletic approach.

The quartet shows a consistent collective character, a signature sound. This became even more apparent in the G-major Quartet. Set apart by a certain elasticity of gesture, the group shows both an openness to individual agency and an ability to snap suddenly into focus as a collective whole. First violinist Amy Lee-Rosenwein proved a fine leader throughout the *Quartet*, placing delightfully off-kilter accents on the primary tune of the *Menuetto* and showing off her compelling solo sound — dark and visceral, perfect for quartet playing — in the *Andante cantabile*.

Second violinist Alicia Koelz has a lovely sound on the lower strings of the instrument, acting as the perfect tonal bridge to the Platonic-ideal viola sound of Joanna Patterson Zakany. Together, these middle-voice players make a great team-within-a-team, always in motion but never overactive. Ell serves as both foundation and equal partner in group conversation, bringing modern muscularity of sound to this 18th-century vision of chamber music.

After an intermission, Isabel Trautwein — a violinist, here playing viola — and cellist Paul Kushious joined the quartet to play Brahms's *Sextet in G*. The players levitated together at the start of the opening Allegro non troppo, soon expanding into textures that found the violins reaching toward the heavens, the violists flowing forward in characteristic Brahmsian fashion, and the cellists grounding all in earthy basslines. The Scherzo had the quality of a time-lapse video of clouds passing over mountaintops. The Adagio grew progressively to a peak of intensity, and in the final Poco Allegro some late afternoon light began to stream through a west window and illuminate the players from the side — an apt visual metaphor for this energetic yet clearly valedictory closing movement.

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