

Cleveland Chamber Music Society Young Artists: the Belka Quartet (May 6)

by David Kulma



Every year the Cleveland Chamber Music Society chooses an undergraduate string quartet from CIM to be its outreach arm. Alongside coachings from the Cavani String Quartet, the students perform educational concerts in local school districts. At the end of the season, they are then featured on CCMS's free Young Artists Showcase. This year's showcase at First Unitarian Church in Shaker Heights on May 6 showed off the excellent Belka Quartet.

The astoundingly capable young quartet — violinists Beatrice Hsieh and Charles Gleason, violist Serena Hsu, and cellist

Daniel Blumhard — are preparing for the Fischhoff Competition this coming weekend. That explains their heavy repertoire: standard quartets by Beethoven and Bartók and a year-old work by Augusta Read Thomas.

Written for and recorded by Chicago's Spektral Quartet, Thomas's *CHI* focuses on the Chinese conception of life force and vital energy in four elaborately-titled movements. The two fast movements pass around buzzing, lightning-fast gestures, while the two slow ones take winding turns through gorgeous, static landscapes. The breathtaking gem of the set is "AURA – atmospheres, colors, vibrations," which glistens through gorgeously combined single notes and slowly builds to vibrant chord towers. The Belka handled the new work with aplomb, showing off their own vitality and amazing precision.

Béla Bartók's nine-decade-old Third Quartet is the most compact and dense of his six-work cycle. Here, Bartók strips his music down to its bare essentials while also stacking his ideas *in extremis*, demanding extreme focus and virtuosity in this continuous, four-section work. The full-bodied and weighty reading given by the Belka showed off their mastery of the complex twists and turns of this passionate yet hermetic repertoire.

The big work of the evening was Beethoven's third Razumovsky quartet: Op. 59, No. 3 in C. The Belka were at their best in the unsettled contemplative introduction and the quicksilver finale. They brought a lightness to the soft music and vibrancy to the fast. While they clearly have the quartet in their minds and under their fingers, they generally played too heavily, as if to underline its seriousness. The lighter sections of the slow movement were intense rather than offering moments of repose. Brusque tone works in the Bartók, but Beethoven's music requires more interpretative leeway.

But this is nit-picking. The Belka play all of this complex and lengthy music extremely well. One could have easily forgotten that these were four undergraduates rather than a professional group.

They should be successful at the Fischhoff, and hopefully they will remain together through and after their trips to different prestigious graduate programs. If they choose to become a professional quartet, they clearly have the ability and sincerity to successfully make the quartet medium their home.

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