

Arts Renaissance Tremont: Amici Quartet (Jan. 31)

by Nicholas Stevens



As the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth sweeps classical music audiences along a twelve-month, field-wide festival of heroics, experiments, rhapsodizing, and apocalyptic drive, a challenge arises for performers who plan to acknowledge the occasion.

In a season peppered with all-Beethoven programs, how does one stand out? Of the many approaches that

could thrill an audience and do justice to the composer, which ones serve the ensemble just as well? On a late January evening, the Amici Quartet offered their answer: impeccable playing and utter unity.

Anyone walking into Pilgrim Congregational Church on January 31, 2020 thinking that the Quartet and Arts Renaissance Tremont had doubled up on Beethoven due to the year would have quickly learned the truth from Artistic Director Christine Haff Paluck. Thanks to a donation, this concert was the sixth of seven in which the friendly band will have presented all of the composer's quartets on ART programs. That the dour prophet of Bonn wrote, on average, a quartet worth cherishing each year between 1799 and 1809 reminds us why we celebrate.

The first piece of the night, Beethoven's *Quartet No. 10 in E-flat*, dates from the end of that span and the height of his "heroic" period. Whatever tales of bravery one cares to hear amid its forward charges and cheeky turns, the true hero here was the Quartet, its members swelling and relaxing at the start like a single body breathing. Urgency crept in as the slow introduction ended, but brightness and warmth radiated from the first fast theme. Violist Lynne Ramsey led the charge into the development section with a lively

solo, and the pizzicato passing-off that gives the quartet its nickname, “the Harp,” drew attention to the group’s consistent coordination.

Soft as a summer afternoon and sophisticated as a salon in evening, the second movement also offered palpitations of angst and beautiful quasi-vocal delivery from first violinist Miho Hashizume. The foursome sprang from a masterfully handled ending straight into a different world: the stormy swirl of the third movement. Cellist Ralph Curry remained richly present throughout, tearing through fast material with apparent ease. Ramsey’s serenity amid motion stood out in the trio. That Curry’s insistent opening rhythms coexisted with the final cadence, light and crisp as a meringue, in the same finale is proof of the Quartet’s concern for contrast.

Hashizume switched to second for Beethoven’s *Quartet No. 1 in F*, with Takako Masame rotating to first. Urgency and tension animated the first gestures and persisted, the Amici making the composer’s first essay in the genre sound as progressive as its successor. Masame handled fleet, short notes with aplomb, and led her colleagues to the brink in the development. Lest the audience forget that Beethoven learned a lot from Haydn, the players made a late-stage evaporation of melody feel like the genuine ending — just before plowing on into an energetic conclusion.

Rustling accompaniment supported a simple, elegant solo passage for Masame at the start of the second movement. Ever tilting toward warm convergence, the Quartet thereby cast a cold shadow over later moments of shuddering grief. Short and sweet with insouciant grace notes, the scherzo felt a world away. The fourth began with eyebrow-raising speed and continued on to hair-raising moments of breakthrough — as fine a distillation of finale form as the string quartet is a distillation of everything that makes its instrumentation a lasting favorite.

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