

Review

Oberlin String Quartet Intensive & Festival: The Cavani Quartet in Kulas Hall (January 17)

by Mike Telin



Why is it that we so often take for granted the musical greatness that exists in our own town? Case in point: the Cavani Quartet.

Appointed quartet-in-residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1988, the Cavanis are the only ensemble to have twice received the Guarneri String Quartet Award for Artistic Excellence (2005 and 2011). In addition to their numerous recital appearances at CIM they are also committed to taking the great string quartet liter-

ature out of the recital hall and into the neighborhoods. An example is the Beethoven & Brotherhood Project – during which the Cavanis played the complete quartets of Beethoven, one at a time, in sixteen public libraries throughout the Cleveland area.

As educators, the Quartet developed CIM's Intensive Quartet Seminar, the Apprentice Quartet Program and The Art of Engagement for student ensembles devoted to the serious study of chamber music. And this past Friday, violinists Annie Fullard and Mari Sato, violist Kirsten Docter and cellist Merry Peckham sent a clear message to a capacity audience in Oberlin Conservatory's Kulas Recital Hall: that the Cavani Quartet is a true musical tour-de-force, during astonishingly beautiful and technically superb performances of music by Bartók and Mendelssohn.

Presented as part of Oberlin's String Quartet Intensive & Festival, the Cavani opened their program with Bartók's third quartet. Dating from 1927, the work's four sections are performed without pause. The composer also incorporates a number of extended techniques into the score, including *sul ponticello* (bowing close to the bridge), *col legno* (playing with the wooden part of the bow), and the *Bartók pizzicato* (plucking the string so that it rebounds against the fingerboard).

The Cavanis owned the work, which lasted roughly fifteen minutes from beginning to end. Their terrific sense of ensemble allowed them to fill the hall with a clear, focused sound that never became harsh or overpowering even during the most raw and primeval sections. The quartet managed the work's many fast-paced mood swings the with a collective ease, truly performing with one mind.

Following a brief pause, the Cavani Quartet was joined by Festival Director and Oberlin Associate Professor of Viola Michael Strauss for a stylish performance of Mendelssohn's *String Quintet No. 2 in B-flat, op. 87*. Composed during the summer of 1845, the four-movement piece is one of the composer's last chamber works.

The opening *Allegro vivace* was played with spirit and the second movement's waltz theme, interspersed with pointed pizzicatos, was performed with panache. Merry Peckham's cello lines were hauntingly somber during the *Adagio e lento* and the five players attacked the finale with gusto, bringing the work to a rousing conclusion. What a pleasure!

As we have come to expect during Cavani Quartet performances, the evening included its fair share of informative yet lighthearted banter. If only all performers could be such engaging orators. This was an evening of chamber music at its best.

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