

CIM Violins of Hope concert with the Cavani Quartet and friends (Dec. 4)

by Robert Rollin



Last Friday evening the Cavani String Quartet (Annie Fullard and Mari Sato, violins, Kirsten Docter, viola, and Merry Peckham, cello) — who serve as Artists-in-Residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music — presented a stellar concert of Czech music in Kulas Hall as the final event of the CIM Violins of Hope concert series.

The series celebrates a collection nearly 50 string instruments that survived the Holocaust and were

restored by Israeli luthier Amnon Weinstein. Talented sisters Rebecca Albers, viola, and Julie Albers, cello, assisted the Quartet in performance of music for string sextet.

The concert mixed a little-known composition by Antonín Dvořák with two works by Erwin Schulhoff, a revered twentieth-century Jewish composer who perished in a Bavarian concentration camp. Added to the *mélange* was an interesting arrangement of the Chasidic melody *Ani Ma'amin*, a testament to the Jewish faith.

Dvořák's *Cypresses for String Quartet and Narrator* originated in 1865 — when he was only 24 — as a set of 18 songs for voice and piano based on romantic lyric poems of Gustav Pflieger Moravsky. In 1882 he revised 12 of them for publication, and in 1887 transcribed and expanded those pieces for string quartet, transforming a youthful work into a sophisticated masterpiece. The Cavani Quartet chose five of those pieces for performance and invited WCLV president Robert Conrad to read the poems before each movement.

The sad quality of “I Know That on My Love to Thee” was captured in lovely solos for first violin, then viola. The ballad-like “Death Reigns in Many a Human Breast” featured an attractive first violin melody with lively pizzicatos in its middle sections, later moving to a sense of good cheer and vigor. The third, “Never Will Love Lead Us to that Goal,” deals with a lost love. Though peevish, it sparkled with violin and viola solos and pizzicato cello accompaniment.

“Nature Lies Peaceful in Slumber and Dreaming” moved more quickly but was replete with many expressive *ritardandos*. A pulsating, eighth-note accompaniment figure reappeared periodically, hinting at the “oom-pas” of a polka. In “You Ask Why My Songs” the text refers to “raging despondency.” The music expresses an extravagant, Schubertian romanticism that vigorously concluded the set. The Quartet played with good dynamic balance, fine shadings in tempo, and excellent interpretative skills throughout.

Erwin Schulhoff was represented by two contrasting works: the *Divertimento for String Quartet, Op. 14* and the *String Sextet*. The first is neoclassical in style, enlivened by Schulhoff’s distinct musical personality. The *Lebhaft* is spritely but intense, with interesting pizzicato “pops” in the first violin and pervasively imaginative rhythmic treatment. The lyrical and haunting Cavatine shimmered with the two violins in thirds supported by cello pizzicatos. In the surprisingly lively Intermezzo, the viola took center stage.

After the slower Romanze, the Rondo alternates a brisk idea with a less hurried yet more intense theme. The rondo theme briefly hints at the opening of Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, and the slower theme suggests Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.”

The Albers sisters joined the Cavani Quartet for Schulhoff’s *String Sextet*, a more original, dissonant work. In his pre-concert lecture, Israel Institute Visiting Artist Obed Zehavi likened the opening movement to the ironic music of Shostakovich. He also said that the inner turmoil reflected in the piece is an outward reflection of Europe in the wake of World War I. One could also detect the influence of Schoenberg’s and Berg’s early atonal works, particularly in the *sul ponticello* tremolo passages after the grand pause in the middle of the movement.

The second movement, Tranquillo: Andante, began with a luscious viola solo played by Rebecca Albers. The lovely octave-doubled passage between violin and cello was a beautiful moment. The movement closed with a piquant musical dissolution.

The stunning Burlesca reached the highest levels of intensity in the work. A pervasive triple meter sparkled as intense crescendos added to the excitement. In the final

movement, various solos contrasted with thicker, more contrapuntal passages full of repeated note figures, until a charged cello solo died away to silence. The ensemble gave a terrific presentation of this imaginative and complex work that deserves many more hearings.

Holocaust survivor Jacqueline Mendels Birn joined Zehavi in the pre-concert lecture, and she spoke of her early childhood in Nazi-controlled Paris. She also provided program information for the well-known Chasidic song, *Ani Ma'amin*, whose haunting and soulful melodic line (attributed to Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar) was supplied with words by Rabbi Azriel Davi Fastag from the 12th of Maimonides' *13 Judaic Principles*:

I believe with pure faith in the coming of the Mashiach (Messiah); and even though he may tarry, nevertheless I continue to believe.

According to Birn, Fastag created the setting while being transported in a cattle car from Warsaw to a concentration camp. Jews all over the world still sing this melody.

No arranger was listed for the short, expressive sextet version of *Ani Ma'amin* played by the Cavani String Quartet and the Albers sisters. Beginning with a gorgeous first cello solo answered by first viola and second cello, it continues with a rather restrained treatment until the first viola suddenly stops in midstream, as if snuffed out in the midst of life, like many prisoners in the concentration camps. Prior to the performance, Annie Fullard said that no applause was expected for the piece, and that fellow audience members should hug one another instead. Still, restrained applause broke out in appreciation for a heart-rending conclusion to this powerful concert.

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