

Kent/Blossom Faculty Concert: Miami Quartet with Spencer Myer (July 6)

by Neil McCalmont



On Wednesday evening, July 6, the Miami String Quartet and pianist Spencer Myer gave a thrilling concert in Ludwig Recital Hall at Kent State University. This installment of the Kent/Blossom Faculty Concert Series showcased two short but fiery string quartets — Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Serioso” in f, Op. 95 and Gabriela Frank’s *Milagros* (“Miracles”) — as well as Johannes Brahms’s *Piano Quartet in g*, Op. 25.

In contrast to the lengthy “Razumovsky” quartets he had written before, Beethoven’s Opus 95 is one of the composer’s most compact works, reflecting the maturing abilities that he developed into his Late Period. Nevertheless, “Serioso” packed a punch, especially as performed by the Miami Quartet on this occasion.

First violinist Benny Kim’s playing of the countermelody in the opening soared with passion, and cellist Keith Robinson reveled in some particularly intense moments toward the end of the movement. The ensemble paced the following Allegretto’s surges admirably, bringing to mind a mountainous ascent. The “Serioso” movement followed immediately. The darting dotted-rhythms drove the piece forward, and the dynamic contrasts that Miami highlighted only furthered the drama. They captured the whimsical nature of the finale’s last bars with remarkable excitement, finishing with a smile.

Frank’s *Milagros* was inspired by her time in Peru (her mother’s native country), and is organized into eight movements titled “*Milagritos*” (“Little Miracles”). Her writing reveals influences of Bartók and Shostakovich, combined with a rather Latin-sounding musical style. The result is a unique and well-constructed quartet that this listener hopes will become a part of the chamber music repertoire. These miniature movements were

crafted with such fine detail you might have thought Schubert had wandered into the 21st century.

The outer movements are violin solos, first executed by Cathy Meng Robinson with exquisite precision, and finally by Benny Kim with utmost passion. One special treat was the fourth movement tango, filled with wild violin slides and vicious yet fun pizzicato strums in the cello and viola. Scott Lee made the viola solos flourish in the following *Milagrato*, playing as if he were telling a captivating ghost story around a campfire. The Miami's performance of this impressive piece was compelling.

Spencer Myer then joined Kim, Lee, and Robinson for the *magnum opus* of the evening: Brahms's first piano quartet. The work is a monument in the genre's literature and one of the composer's most beloved masterpieces.

The ensemble opened with a thoroughly Romantic sound, filled with luscious vibrato — if a bit excessive at times. However, their ability to capture the essence of Brahms's music so well exhibited his compositional versatility: they passed themes back and forth like a Bach fugue, they delivered their scales with the clarity of Mozart, and they captured the restless spirit of Beethoven. They played the opening movement's final notes as if the music had collapsed dead. Myer played the secondary theme in the following movement with captivating sweetness, impressively overcoming the muffled sound of the piano. The Andante rocked back and forth like a cradle that lulled the listeners hypnotically, only to thrash them awake by the finale. The "Rondo alla Zingarese" culminated in the evening's most intense moment as the quartet gained speed and volume, raising the tension at each measure. The final chord took your breath away.

Despite the blurry acoustics of the hall, Myer and the Miami String Quartet treated the audience to a joy-inducing and satisfying concert.

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