

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Belcea Quartet at Plymouth (Oct. 18)

by Daniel Hathaway



The members of the London-based Belcea Quartet hail from Romania (first violinist Corina Belcea), France (second violinist Axel Schacher and cellist Antoine Lederlin), and Poland (violinist Krzysztof Chorzelski), but they meld their various backgrounds into an arresting blend that is all the more colorful for its multinational origins.

On October 18, the Belcea returned to the Cleveland Chamber Music Society at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights — for the first time since 2014 — for riveting performances of early and late quartets by Franz Schubert, with Dmitri Shostakovich's

weird and wild *Quartet No. 8*, Op. 110, tucked in between.

Schubert still had his training wheels attached when he wrote his E-flat Quartet, D. 87, in 1813. By 1826, when he penned the G-major Quartet, D. 887, much had happened in the musical world in general and in Schubert's life in particular. In the interim, he had composed 800 works of various shapes and sizes, and his prowess as a composer had taken a quantum leap.

D. 87 is a charming domestic work with perhaps the shortest Scherzo in captivity, but the Belcea played it with lavish attention to its considerable level of detail, pointing up its many nuances and little jokes, and creating extreme dynamic contrasts.

The D. 887 Quartet stands up bravely to Beethoven's later essays in the genre, beginning with a striking tonal ambiguity — G major and g minor chords rub up against each other in a gesture that permeates the rest of the piece. Startling key changes and sudden dynamic surges abound in the slow movement. The charming Scherzo is followed by a

fierce tarantella interrupted twice by a hymn-like passage. The Belcea invested the work with relentless energy, perfect intonation, and a gripping sense of presence.

How many emotions does Shostakovich visit in the course of his 1960 c-minor Quartet? Enough to leave an audience wrung out with its shifts between despair (he dedicated it “To the memory of the composer of this quartet”) and its biting satire of the Soviet regime. Shostakovich’s solidarity with the oppression of the Jews is worked out in his astonishing parody of Klezmer music.

Dmitri Shostakovich also codes part of his name (D-S-C-H) into the genetic material of the piece, a technical feature which program annotator Peter Laki wrote about in detail, but that’s the composer’s little secret and only subliminally impacts the psychological content of the piece. The Belcea visited all the emotional levels of the work in their vivid performance. More Schubert after intermission was a necessary act of catharsis.

But after D. 887, the audience wanted more, and they got — more Shostakovich. As an encore, the Belcea played a movement from another of his quartets, less complicated this time, but still full of an attractive, demonic energy, of which Tuesday’s four players still had a lot left.

In a nod to current sports events in Cleveland, Chorzelski came out for the encore brandishing a red Indians towel, which got a round of applause. Oddly, he didn’t get a response when he queried the audience about the score of that evening’s Game 4 against the Toronto Blue Jays. Was the Belcea Quartet’s playing indeed so enthralling that nobody was checking their smartphones?

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