

Oberlin Artist Recital Series: St. Lawrence String Quartet (Nov. 11)

by Nicholas Jones



I walked into the St. Lawrence String Quartet concert at Oberlin's Finney Chapel on Friday, November 11 hoping for a respite from the tensions and anxieties of the week's events, and I was not disappointed. With total conviction and attentiveness, the St. Lawrence played music that soothed the nerves and stimulated the heart. I was expecting beauty, focus, and artistry. But I was not prepared for a further impact: the powerful message of *how* the St. Lawrence plays.

In some quartets, the individuality of the players almost disappears under a uniform style — a wonderful achievement — making the music sound seamless, voices blending in a common effort. But the St. Lawrence plays with a commitment to difference, not uniformity: each player sounds unapologetically and unarguably like her or himself.

Cellist Christopher Costanza plays with an assertive and forthright presence. Violist Lesley Robertson engages the inner lines of the score with a combination of driving rhythmic energy and plangent melodicism. Owen Dalby plays the second violin parts with lyricism and a silver clarity of tone. And first violinist Geoff Nuttall, half rising out of his chair with enthusiasm, caps the sound with fearless exuberance and an almost frightening love of fast, exposed, and finger-busting passages.

The results on Friday were electrifying: the ear bounced from one player to another, constantly surprised by difference and delighted by individuality. In this week of national divisions, it was a big uplift to experience this kind of intimate, masterful connection among four obviously different players. Out of all that came stunning, collective performances.

This was no program of light classics, to say the least: opening with Haydn's intense *Quartet in f*, Op. 20, No. 5, following up with John Adams's highly crafted *Second String Quartet* (2015, written for the St. Lawrence), and concluding with Beethoven's incomparably strange and enthralling A-minor quartet, Op. 132.

Especially captivating in the Haydn — one of the staples of the St. Lawrence repertoire — was the slow movement, in which a melodic dance tune is interwoven with high, intricate complications in the first violin, tender and edgy lines that ornament but become far more than merely decorative, as delicate and sure as a spider's thread. The final movement is a thrilling double fugue that begins in a whispery pianissimo, its latent passion revealed only in flashes.

Written with a deep respect for the quartet medium and its origins in the classical style, Adams's quartet complemented its neighbors in the program. Though often labelled a minimalist, Adams filled this piece with motivic development reminiscent of the sonata forms that Haydn loved and Beethoven inherited (and rebelled against). As in the Haydn, the slow section that opens Adams's second movement is especially powerful: the fierce, Beethovenesque furor of the opening *Allegro molto* gives way to a gentler, more contemplative *Andantino* that has an almost tidal, oceanic sense of ebb and flow. The final section, appropriately marked "Energico," is a high-octane wake-up call, full of intensity and action.

The Beethoven Op. 132 is the second of his late quartets, works of difficulty and innovation in their time, and still so today. In the opening *Allegro*, the St. Lawrence gave us crisp, brief gestures, apparent snippets of sound that demand — and received — full attention as they are repeated and varied. Moments of melody occur, but they seem to come to us strained through filters of these interwoven motifs. A wild coda leads into the second movement, a strangely fragmented minuet with a central section in which the first violin imitates a bagpipe stretched to the limits of range and complication.

The core of the quartet is the long and profound third movement, added to the original four-part structure in May of 1825 when Beethoven recovered from a long and serious illness. This "Sacred Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a Convalescent" is set in the Lydian mode, one of the ancient liturgical scales. Out of a tentative, searching counterpoint comes the hymn of thanks, which is punctuated by passages of leaping joy. That music of renewal takes the quartet through two more movements — a short, energetic march and a complex and exuberant finale.

Obviously appreciating the audience's loud ovations, the St. Lawrence played an encore: another slow movement, this time from Haydn's Op. 20, No. 1. It was appropriately marked *affettuoso e sostenuto* — emotional and sustained. The whole evening was just that, and much needed.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 14, 2016.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)