

**Cleveland Chamber Music Society:
Piano Quartets from Lincoln Center (Jan. 17)**

by Daniel Hathaway



The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center launched a seven-city tour of Piano Quartets with its January 17 concert at Plymouth Church for the Cleveland Chamber Music Society. Large-scale, early works by Gabriel Fauré and Johannes Brahms received masterful performances from pianist Alessio Bax, violinist Ani Kavafian, violist Yura Lee, and cellist Paul Watkins.

Unlike the piano trio, the piano quartet came late to the chamber music repertoire, Mozart being among the first to explore adding a viola to the more familiar violin-cello-piano team. Brahms wrote three such pieces in 1858, 1862, and 1875. Fauré completed two in 1879 and 1886.

Fauré's g-minor *Quartet No. 2*, Op. 45 kept pianist Alessio Bax busy with ornate, perpetual motion lines, and gave violist Yura Lee some lovely solo interludes. Much of the writing finds the strings playing in unison against a prominent piano part, especially in the broad, striding themes of the finale. In an uncharacteristic move, Fauré based his third movement on the tolling of bells in a nearby village, a lovely touch that begins in the piano, then comes back in the strings after a poignant viola solo.

Brahms was 28 when he wrote his second Piano Quartet, Op. 26, a work characterized by oddly-shaped melodic material and mercurial emotions. As in the Fauré, the strings often play in unison while the piano is otherwise occupied. The waltz-like Scherzo soon heats up in anticipation of the highly accented, folk dance-inspired Finale — whose progress is frequently halted in favor of more serious subjects.

Kavafian and Bax led off with a little rarity by an even younger Brahms, written when the composer was only 20 as part of a tribute piece to the violinist Joseph Joachim — himself only 22 at the time. “Frei aber einsam” (free but lonely) was Joachim’s motto, and Robert Schumann conceived of a joint project — the *F-A-E Sonata* — to which Brahms would contribute the Scherzo. It’s fun and lasts less than five minutes, but already finds the composer experimenting with rhythms and harmonies in anticipation of his mature style.

CMS likes to send its groups on tour with big works — remember the Dvořák and Brahms string sextets program last season? As distinguished and stylish as the playing was on Tuesday evening, scheduling two 40-minute pieces on the same program can be fatiguing for performers and listeners alike. It might have been a more canny choice to program another solo or duet in place of one of the piano quartets for a welcome change in timbre and texture — and to hear more of the individual artistry of this fine group of musicians.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com January 24, 2017.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)