

CREDO Chamber Music: Jasper String Quartet (July 18)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Oberlin Conservatory is a busy place even in mid-summer. On Tuesday evening, July 18, while the second session of the concerto round of the Cooper Violin Competition was in progress in Warner Concert Hall, the Jasper String Quartet made a special appearance right across the lounge in Kulas Recital Hall as part of their residency at CREDO Chamber Music.

Though I had to hear the first work on the Jaspers' program — Haydn's *Quartet in G*, Op. 76, No. 1 — from the Kulas anteroom because a Cooper performance ran slightly past 8:00, it was clear that the quartet is a musical force of nature. Even through closed doors, the Jaspers' tone was robust and compelling, and Haydn's smallest details and wryest bits of humor came across clearly in the hands of J Freivogel, Sae Chonabayashi, Sam Quintal, and Rachel Henderson Freivogel.

Inside the hall, packed full of CREDO students, faculty, and townspeople, the quartet's sound became positively voluminous when the ensemble turned to three movements from Aaron Jay Kernis's *String Quartet No. 3* ("River"), a work co-commissioned by the Jaspers. Violist Sam Quintal, the group's spokesperson, noted that because the whole piece was some 40 minutes long, only three movements would be played: No. 1, "Source," No. 4, "Cavatina," and No. 2, "Flow/Surge."

Kernis composes pleasantly but unremittingly dissonant music in complex textures, and his vision of a river is animated and eventful. The composer writes that he was inspired by the idea of change and flux, both in Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe*, which uses the inexorable progress of the Rhine River as metaphor, and by Karl Ove Knausgaard's

multi-volume *My Struggle*, a chronicle of the flow of everyday events accompanied by psychological meditations.

Although composers' intentions aren't always manifested in their music, Kernis was eminently successful in embedding his concept in "River," and the Jaspers put these three movements across magnificently. "Flow/Surge," a busy scherzo, was particularly riveting.

After intermission, Credo and Oberlin alumnus Daniel Orsen joined the Jaspers to play second viola in Brahms's *Viola Quintet No. 2 in G*, Op. 111. Written in the summer of 1890 and intended as the composer's swan song before retirement (he un-retired the following year), the Quintet captures the sunny ambiance of Brahms's recent holiday in Italy. The Jaspers, in turn, uncorked and shared that carefree spirit in Kulas Hall.

In addition to producing volumes of gorgeous sound, the Jaspers play with equal measures of enthusiasm and care, and their ensemble is next to flawless. Much of that has to do with the constant communication they maintain through eye contact, always smiling confidently back and forth to coordinate entrances and acknowledge details that have gone well. Orsen looked terrified — as well one might when making a cameo appearance with the Jasper Quartet — but joined Quintal in beautiful viola duets and generally did himself proud.

If you really want to feel good about your work as an ensemble, play for students you've been coaching for the last few days. Whoops, whistles, and other youthful expressions of delight brought the evening to a close during a long ovation.

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