

Tuesday Musical: Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble (Oct. 19)

by Nicholas Stevens



In the ten seconds that conclude the first movement of Antonín Dvořák’s *Sextet in A*, the world outside falls away. The players must sing out the first theme at full volume, slowing as though crossing a finish line—then, a moment of gut-wrenching tension gives way to a fading sunset of a chord. A merely excellent ensemble might pull out all the stops here.

Yet the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Chamber Ensemble, being the first-rate group of musicians they long have been, keep this moment incandescent while maintaining a sense of larger-scale trajectory. Throughout their performances of Dvořák’s *Sextet* and George Enescu’s *Octet* in Akron last week, the ensemble made the most of their penchants for both nuance and overarching narrative.

The group’s sound filled Akron’s E.J. Thomas Hall on Thursday, October 19, in a concert presented by Tuesday Musical. Moving as one, the players brought the same precision and passion to inner parts as to movement climaxes. Much of the credit for their shared sense of direction must go to violinist-leader Tomo Keller and second violin Harvey de Souza, who make for a coordinated team. In their renditions of both works, the ensemble maintained a level of precision only achievable by a roster of world-class players.

Dvořák, well into his career by the time he wrote his *Sextet*, knew how to pace a piece. In the Academy members’ performance, the first movement opened in a mood of utter serenity, soon to dissolve. At the return of the first theme, this naïve tranquility dropped away, replaced by graceful motion. In the second movement, a Russo-Czech *Dumka*, the

ensemble moved between dance melodies and contrasting material as one might step from one room into another. Interpreted as a sort of perpetual-motion mechanism beset by human interventions, such as a hilariously timed upward slide for second violist Fiona Bonds, the following *Furiant* blazed by Dvořák, a violist, gave many of the composition's most beautiful solos to the first viola. In Robert Smissen's hands, these passages radiated warmth.

Enescu's *Octet*, completed as the composer transitioned from student life to a brilliant career, hardly lacks for high points – in fact, he poured so much of his heart and intellect into this early masterpiece that it can leave little breathing room for even the best interpreters. However, the ensemble made even this dense essay in symphonic form easy to love. The *Octet* begins with a theme that haunts the entire piece. At the end of the first movement, the first violinist takes up this tune as the other seven players sustain a hushed chord. This melody stirs restlessly against the static texture, at last coming to rest as part of the larger sound. Here, between periods of relentless activity, was peace. At various points, the *Octet* recalls the work of Enescu's classmate Ravel, and points the way toward Bartók and Shostakovich – yet the ensemble invited listeners to hear the composer on his own terms.

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