

Bennewitz Quartet in all-Czech program on Rocky River Chamber Music Series (Feb. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



“We don’t often play all-Czech programs,” Bennewitz Quartet second violinist Štěpán Ježek said from the stage of West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church on Monday evening, February 12. But the Rocky River Chamber Music Society audience can be glad they did on that occasion. Ježek joined his colleagues

Jakub Fišer, violin, Jiří Pinkas, viola, and Štěpán Doležal, cello, in white-hot performances of works by Leoš Janáček, Bedřich Smetana, and Antonín Dvořák, playing with the pure intensity that only native Czechs could have achieved.

Monday evening’s program began with Janáček’s second quartet, subtitled “Intimate Letters,” that chronicles the composer’s hopeless, 11-year fixation on a married woman, Kamila Stösslová (he was married himself). Some 700 letters he sent her were never answered. The composer seems to represent himself in the viola line of this bizarre quartet, whose emotional content ranges from sweetness to frenzy. The Bennewitz were chameleonic, responding instantly and with deep commitment to every mood change.

Smetana’s autobiographical *String Quartet No. 1* received particularly sympathetic treatment from the Bennewitz. Studded with luscious viola solos, thoughtful pauses, and an intense cello solo that represents an elegy for the composer’s wife, the work draws the listener happily along until in the last movement the interruption of a harmonic in the first violin symbolizes the tinnitus that heralded Smetana’s impending deafness.

In an interesting aside, we learned from Ježek that although we regard Smetana as a central figure in Czech culture, he never quite got the hang of the Czech language — German being the official tongue in Bohemia at the time.



The strangeness of the Janáček and the nostalgia of the Smetana were followed by the general ebullience of Dvořák in the form of his *Quartet No. 13*, Op. 106. Written on his arrival back in Czechoslovakia after his sojourn in the United States, the piece boasts all the earmarks of the composer's national, folk music-inspired style. The Bennewitz luxuriated boldly in the music, bringing a memorable evening to a satisfying conclusion.

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