

ENCORE Chamber Music: the Miró Quartet (June 8)

by Delaney Meyers



After mixing up the start time, I arrived to the Miró Quartet concert on Friday evening, June 8 just in time to witness the aftermath of violist John Largess' two broken strings. For their relatively short length and narrow width, those strings caused quite the wave of amused chatter in the Tudor House at Gilmour Academy.

Though sadly I missed the Haydn, the rest of the Miró's program still felt full and varied with Kevin Puts' *Credo* and Beethoven's Op. 132 String Quartet.

Credo is a deep, expansive work composed in conversation with Miró first violinist Daniel Ching and commissioned by Chamber Music Monterey Bay. *Credo* (Latin for "I believe") was originally conceived as part of a musical program Ching was creating to explore "the lighter side of America." While that lightness can often be in limited supply — and the piece is by no means easy listening — *Credo* manages to capture a certain charm with distinct references to fiddle music and classic "Americana" style through open, resonant harmonies.

The Miró injected the piece with energy and character, creating an impressive range of color and tone. The opening is uplifting and occupies mostly major tonalities, with first-violin virtuosities peeking through in the form of quotations from Bach's E-Major Partita and the Sibelius *Violin Concerto* — two major staples of the instrument's repertoire. Given the title of the piece, these quotes seemed to reference a shared belief amongst a diversified community (in this case, the trio of prickling string harmonies).

After a rhythmic train-like section, the work transitions into a fragile, hymn-like lament passed around the quartet with long drones underneath grounded by cellist Joshua

Gindele. The individual lines converge into a pseudo-canon in the upper three voices before coming slowly to a stop with a simple melody that ends the piece — finally finding the “lighter side” in this serene landscape of sound. The musicians held the silence that followed for quite some time.

Beethoven’s Op. 132 *String Quartet in a*, written two years before he died, is one of the most challenging and intricate pieces in the quartet repertoire, and the Miró negotiated the composer’s complex structure like it was second-nature. The ensemble got inside the work and “reconstructed” it using their own unique quartet language, bringing out the dissonances in a new and intriguing way. This is part of what makes Beethoven’s later works, though composed almost 200 years ago, always sound contemporary.

This five-movement work expresses the full range of nearly every emotion, and the Quartet displayed them all with passion and vigor. The centerpiece is the third movement: *Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an der Gottheit, in der Lydischen Tonart*, which translates as “Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a convalescent in the Lydian mode,” and was written after the composer’s long struggle with a painful gastric illness.

The opening of this famous movement was beautiful if slightly tentative. However, as the ensemble warmed their sound, their motion became more synchronised and their expressiveness increased in what was ultimately a compelling performance. The finale, *Allegro appassionato*, was appropriately dramatic, the Quartet using up all the energy they had left.

The Miró closed out the evening with an encore: *Ashokan Farewell* featuring second violinist and national fiddling champion William Fedkenheuer. Their arrangement was short and sweet, the perfect send-off after a fantastic concert.

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