

Credo Chamber Music: Arianna String Quartet (July 3)

by Delaney Meyers



The Arianna Quartet returned to Credo Music at Oberlin Conservatory for a week of coaching, teaching, and a performance on Tuesday, July 3rd. The sold-out audience in Kulas Recital Hall was treated to a lovely escape from the summer heat with an evening of first-class chamber music.

The concert began with one of Shostakovich's lesser-heard string quartets, No. 1 in C. As they often do, the quartet took a warm, thoughtful approach to the piece. Lighter fare than many of his other works, the first movement features whimsical cello glissandi, played by Kurt Baldwin, underneath a light-hearted violin melody.

The second movement and centerpiece of the quartet opens with a contemplative viola solo, which Joanna Mendoza played with a deep, rich tone. Disgruntled underpinnings peek through a melody that seems to be falsely joyful, and second violinist Julia Sakharova's complex sound grounded the ensemble throughout the movement. The reserved opening melody returns, this time with alternating second violin and viola pizzicati accompaniment, until the instrumentalists return to their bows for an unsettled, unconvincing Shostakovich-ian harmony.

A tightly-played dotted rhythm pervades the third movement, Allegro molto, which passed by like a dream where you aren't totally asleep. The finale is a first violin show, John McGrosso's fingers running up and down the fingerboard with ease and precision. The music calms down momentarily, and eventually a nationalistic ending prevails.

The Quartet continued with what the program listed as Kim Portnoy's *Blues for Anton*, but was actually the first movement of Bartok's *String Quartet No. 2*. After a round of slightly confused applause following the in-depth Moderato, McGrosso announced from the stage that there had been a mistake in the program, and quipped, "So if you liked that, good, because there's more!"

In the second movement, Allegro molto capriccioso, quick, whipping glissandi pass around the quartet, and time is distorted like a Dali painting. The Quartet was completely engaged in this odd, chromatic world. The structure comes undone towards the end of the movement and reassembles itself again, but this time something has gotten out of order in the haste.

The Lento opens with deliciously crunchy chords, and continues with a yearning violin melody, stepping downward and then rising again. Near the end, the Quartet's growling sound grew together as if it was about to envelope you. Throughout the piece, the Arianna never missed an opportunity for nuance and color change, their warm sound and well-crafted blend unshakable even in the most dissonant of moments.

Kim Portnoy's *Blues for Anton*, composed for the Quartet, opens with jazzy slides and the presentation of a tone row accompanied by a walking bassline. Rhythmic insertions slowly begin to build in energy, insisting that this piece is, in fact, jazz. The Arianna committed to the swing of the music. It often bordered on campy, but retreated just in time into something unique, such as a *sul ponticello* section in all four voices.

Oberlin and Credo faculty violist Peter Slowik joined the Arianna for Brahms' *String Quintet in F*. He fit into the Quartet's blend with ease, as the five musicians passed around beautiful, intertwining Brahmsian melodies. With such thick textures, it can be hard to bring out the important lines, but each player has mastered the art of holding back when appropriate.

The second movement is a lush bed of sound, heroic interjections lilt in and out. McGrosso and Sakharova's sizzling melodic sounds were delightfully complementary, and the ending of the underrated movement felt like a warm hug. It was a transporting performance. The Allegro energico - presto has more humor in it than other works by the composer, rounding out the evening on a fun, upbeat note.

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