

## Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Doric String Quartet (Feb. 22)

by Daniel Hathaway



The superb London-based Doric String Quartet brought both musical and equipment surprises to their riveting performance on the Oberlin Artist Recital Series in Finney Chapel on February 22. Period bows came out not only for the opening Haydn quartet but also for the concluding Mendelssohn, lending extra flexibility to the former and an unusual suppleness to the latter. And Britten's *String Quartet No. 3* enjoyed an extra dollop of authenticity through

Hélène Clément's viola, an 1843 instrument by Giussani that had been gifted by Frank Bridge to Britten — his star pupil — just before the composer had sailed off to the United States.

Haydn's B-flat Quartet, Op. 33, No. 4 is replete with witty details like the tiny echoes at phrase endings in the first movement and the pizzicati at the very end of the work, and rapidly alternating moods enliven the piece from stem to stern. First violinist Alex Reddington was featured in an expressive aria in the Largo, and, as promised by cellist John Myerscough in his verbal notes, the finale featured "the naughtiest and silliest" of all of Haydn's pranks. The quartet was both musically and kinetically involved, second violinist Ying Xue moving her body with special enthusiasm.

In contrast, Britten's quartet was all serious business. Stark and lean in the opening "Duets," wild and Shostakovich-like in the "Burlesque," and valedictory in its final "Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima)," the work is the hyper-expressive statement of a man at the end of his life and career who still has much to say and

novel ways of saying it. The Doric, who have an affinity for Britten and understand his music thoroughly, held the good-sized crowd in thrall from first note to last.

Those period bows came out again for Mendelssohn's e-minor Quartet, Op. 44, No. 2, allowing the Doric to paint its nostalgic moodiness with fine-tipped brush strokes. The Scherzo — a Mendelssohnian specialty — was gossamer, the Andante touching but not sentimental. In the Presto finale, the Quartet achieved sudden, amazing contrasts of color and dynamics, bringing their enrapturing performance to a breathtaking conclusion. The Doric's choice of an encore — the slow movement of Haydn's Op. 33, No. 1 — fit beautifully into the design of the evening.

Going backstage to meet the players afterward, I asked Myerscroft to show me one of those period bows, which takes the notion of original equipment back from the 18th century into the Pleistocene: the frogs are inset with ivory from woolly mammoths dug up from the Siberian permafrost. Good to know that no elephants were harmed in producing this concert!

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com March 5, 2019.*

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