

Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Cuarteto Casals (March 5)

by Daniel Hathaway



The Barcelona-based Cuarteto Casals seems to have a standing invitation from the Cleveland Chamber Music Society, having visited its series every other year in at least the past decade — and for good reason. Abel Tomàs, Vera Martínez Mehner, Jonathan Brown, and Arnau Tomàs bring an engaging Iberian intensity to their repertoire — along with the

kind of inquisitive spirit that leads them to experiment with different styles of bows, collaborate with living composers, and commission new works.

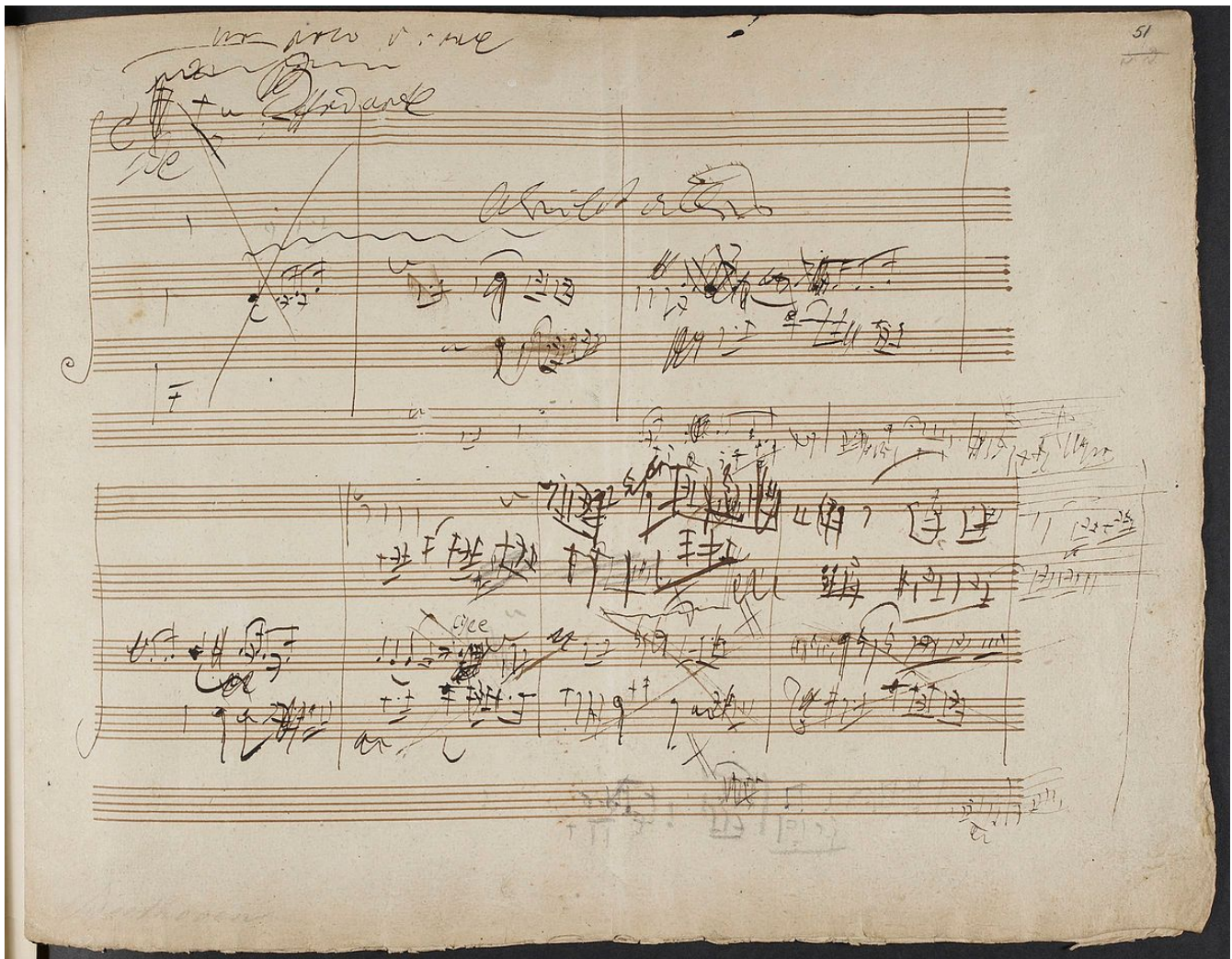
Recently, the Quartet embarked on a multi-year project involving a six-concert series of the complete Beethoven quartets interleaved with six commissioned works. It would have been interesting to hear one of those new pieces on March 5 at Plymouth Church, but although their program offered nothing composed since 1847, Cuarteto Casals made old music — especially Beethoven’s Op. 131 — sound new and special.

“New and special” were exactly the words Haydn used to describe his Op. 33 Quartets in 1781, and the 29-year-old Mozart was so struck by them that he wrote six of his own pieces to dedicate to his mentor, a gesture that brought effusive praise from Haydn.

Quarteto Casals began their program with Mozart’s “Hunt” Quartet, K. 458, so called because of its horn call-like theme, which the composer uses imaginatively in the first movement. The Tomàs brothers traded wonderful lyrical melodies back and forth

between first violin and cello in the affecting Adagio, and all four players playfully joined the dance-like finale in various combinations.

Abel Tomàs and Martínez Mehner switched chairs for Mendelssohn's *Quartet No. 6 in f*, composed after his sister succumbed to a stroke in 1847, and the last piece of music he completed before his own death later that year. Scarcely a passing cloud had darkened Mendelssohn's music before Fanny's demise, but this piece is brooding and tragic even in its Allegro assai movement — a scherzo by any other name. Cuarteto Casals brought out its agitation and sense of tragedy in evocative tremolos and unsettled syncopations.



The ensemble brought all of its interpretational powers to bear in its gripping performance of Beethoven's C-Sharp Quartet, Op. 131 (a page of the composer's sketches is pictured above). The work abruptly severs connections with Beethoven's earlier works by jettisoning most of the conventions of the string quartet. Its seven (!) continuous movements begin with a fugue that darts into previously uncharted

harmonic territory. After a brief respite in the unrelated key of D, Beethoven embarks on a long set of variations in which he both elaborates and deconstructs the theme and gives each instrument a solo cadenza.

A comical Presto and a brief lament-like Adagio lead to a stormy finale where momentum flags briefly only to be rekindled in a race to the finish.

All of that accounts for 40 minutes' worth of enthralling music, and Cuarteto Casals held the audience firmly in its grasp throughout its intense performance. Although the good-sized audience gave the players a resounding ovation, it was clear that after that kind of effort, an encore was out of the question.

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