

Apollon Musagète Quartet on CCMS Series (Feb. 4)

by Daniel Hathaway



Today's touring string quartets hew to so uniformly high a standard that it's often little individual touches that make ensembles stand out.

The Polish musicians who make up the Apollon Musagète Quartet showed up at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights for their debut on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series on February 4 in matching plaid suits and

black shirts. And jettisoning their jackets, they played standing (except for the cellist).

More importantly, their playing was distinguished by an enormous dynamic range, an unusual malleability of phrasing, and a wide palette of color that brought extra vitality to music by Haydn, Penderecki, and Dvořák.

Playing while standing had an immediate effect on the quartet's delivery of Haydn's "Lark" Quartet, Op. 64, No. 5, which carried into the church space with special immediacy. With improved sightlines, it was refreshing to be able to see more of the players at work. At the beginning, first violinist Paweł Zalejski's stratospheric melody that gives the piece its nickname soared out with remarkable clarity over the pizzicati of his colleagues, violinist Bartosz Zachłód, violist Piotr Szumieł, and cellist Piotr Skweres. The quartet's handling of shifting rhythms, chromaticism, and dizzying counterpoint was delightful.

The ensemble typically includes a Polish work on their programs, and on Tuesday evening, the centerpiece of their concert was Krzysztof Penderecki's Third Quartet, mysteriously subtitled "Leaves of an Unwritten Diary." Composed in 2008 in a single movement, and later adapted by Penderecki for quintet with double bass, the work's five sections are linked by an ominous and persistent ostinato figure and infused with what may be a Romanian gypsy tune that the composer remembered hearing his father play on the fiddle.

Like a literary diary, the piece chronicles a variety of passing moods in alternating episodes of intensity and calm, and the Apollon Musagète musicians held the audience in thrall for its nearly 20-minute duration.

Dvořák's Op. 105 is an outlier in the chamber music world because the composer wrote it in the unusual-for-stringed-instruments key of A-flat. The avoidance of open strings gives the piece a somber cast sometimes at odds with its general cheerfulness. Otherwise, it visits some unusually sophisticated musical territory: polyrhythms, passages of wild chromaticism, and imitative counterpoint.

The Apollon Musagète brought out the work's Eastern European ethos (Dvořák draws on the Czech *furiant* for inspiration in the second movement), downplaying its more Germanic structural elements and ending with a vivacious coda that sounded brilliant even in A-flat.

A spontaneous standing ovation and several callbacks elicited a charming encore: the "Alla Czeca" from Erwin Schulhoff's *Five Pieces for String Quartet*.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com February 18, 2020.

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