

Miró Quartet begins Beethoven cycle for Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival (July 16)

by Jarrett Hoffman



The 24 hours leading up to the opening concert of this year's Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival were, as artistic director Aloysia Friedmann said during a post-recital Q&A, "harrowing."

The Miró Quartet had chosen a private venue in their home base of Austin, Texas from which to play Beethoven's complete string quartets over the course of the Festival, a way to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth. A new platform called [OurConcerts.live](#) would allow for a high-end livestream and high-definition video, as well as the managing and processing of ticket sales.

One problem: that private venue turned out not to have a strong enough Internet connection. When that hadn't yet been remedied by noon on the day of the concert, July 16, the Miró made the call to pivot to cellist Joshua Gindele's living room, as Gindele said during that Q&A, sitting next to violist John Largess and speaking remotely with Friedmann.

Because of the technology required for high-quality streaming, that change of venue was complicated. Largess estimated that it took over four hours to switch locations and check the sound and cameras at the cellist's house, which is also in Austin.

Working from home — could anything be more fitting during the coronavirus pandemic? But on this telecommuting call, there were no wandering cats, no messy bookcases, no roommates appearing in the background, just a beautiful and intimate space that was natural for a recital.

Since technology was the big suspense of the day, let's stay on that topic before getting to the music. The video was of very high quality. Occasionally, and only briefly, small sections of the screen became pixelated. The several alternating camera angles provided a cinematic touch, though the close-up view of the quartet looked a little unnatural.



The sound was excellent, a compliment that goes three ways — to the quartet for their beautiful and varied tone, to the room for its pleasing acoustics, and to the team of OurConcerts.live for their impressive work on the technological side of things. Split-second blips in the audio were rare and easy to shrug off.

The whole package was wrapped up in a nice presentation from the Festival. There were opening remarks from Friedmann, a pre-recorded message about Beethoven from second violinist William Fedkenheuer, an intermission that featured David Fulton (series sponsor, friend of the Miró, and instrument collector), and finally that engaging Q&A, which also included discussions about instrument choice and seating arrangement.

As first violinist Daniel Ching said at the start of the recital, “We’ve been working on cameras, broadband, getting microphones set up, mixing boards, graphics cards — all kinds of things here. But now, it’s time for the music.”

Playing the second and third quartets of Op. 18, the Miró showed themselves to be masterful interpreters of Beethoven, capturing the exciting surprises, clever musical cliffhangers, and boldness of energy of these early quartets that are only somewhat conservative, as the composer’s writing goes.

Moreover, the group brought loads of personality and a strong sense of interconnectedness to the fore. On either end of the ensemble, Ching and Fedkenheuer flew through their frequent virtuosic gestures with vibrant energy, and traded them off easily. In the middle of the formation, Gindele and Largess provided a warm, rich underpinning, as well as a beautiful sense of lyricism whenever the opportunity arose. Intonation was excellent, resulting in gorgeous, emotionally powerful chords, with

only momentary faltering of pitch toward the end of Op. 18, No. 3, which comprised the first half of the program.

Don't be fooled by "No. 2" and "No. 3." As Largess writes in his elucidating [program notes](#) (scroll down on that page), the Miró have laid out the cycle in chronological order, based on studies of Beethoven's sketchbooks.

These two quartets are paced differently, particularly when it comes to the second movement of No. 2, an unconventional hybrid of slow and fast, as Largess notes. The works are also unique for their endings. After brewing up a state of excited anxiety, No. 3 closes peacefully — a creative and refreshing anticlimax. Beethoven teases at just that in No. 2, then opts for a roaring finish.

Still, they share lots of common language. At least for this first concert, the chronological ordering sacrificed a measure of variety in favor of maintaining the larger arc, one that will surely be fascinating to experience as the Miró [continue with the cycle](#) through August 8.

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