

Piano quintets from Local 4 Music Fund (Dec. 17)

by Jarrett Hoffman



The Local 4 Music Fund continued its “Tuning In” series on December 17 with an engaging, emotionally wide-ranging program of piano quintets, streamed live from the Steinway Piano Gallery of Cleveland.

The opener was Amy Beach’s Op. 67 (1907), a late-Romantic showcase of powerful and direct

expressiveness. The closer was Dmitri Shostakovich’s intense but close-to-the-vest Op. 57 (1940). And in between was Eric Charnofsky’s *5 by 5* (2011), in one respect a hybrid of those other styles of musical communication: sometimes overtly emotional, but often exhibiting a coolness in its leaping gestures and its glassy harmonies.

Charnofsky himself manned the piano throughout the concert, joined by violinists Diana Pepelea-Vardi and Jennifer Walvoord, violist Esther Nahm, and cellist Derek Snyder. With no audience present, and with the camera alternating through several angles, the quintet took the opportunity to arrange themselves in the round, allowing for the unique experience of seeing them clearly lock eyes as they navigated the music. That added immediacy, countering an acoustic that shaved off the vividness from the sound of the strings.

The Beach Quintet brings waves of potent expression which can sometimes feel unrelenting, but which climb higher than you expect at certain moments, taking you aback with awe. Again and again, this group found the juice to meet those moments, summoning ever richer, more robust sounds — always beautiful, never strained. Sadly,

one climax in the third movement that promised to deliver in just that way was lost when the stream froze for several seconds.



Each movement of *5 by 5* features a different player and builds around a different interval, from thirds to sevenths. All are attractively written, but especially after the intensity of the Beach, the most compelling movements were the more understated ones, like the gorgeous “Meditation,” which strikes a unique balance between peace and subtle tension. Hushed playing from the strings, gentle piano commentary, and a wonderful extended solo from Nahm added up to an absorbing performance.

There’s something very human about the Shostakovich Quintet, which consistently works itself up with tension, then stops just short of sharing what’s really on its mind. That self-censorship can test your patience, but it also makes the briefly personal moments all the more satisfying — like in the Intermezzo, which lets its guard down a little to allow for tender melodies from the first violin, here played beautifully by Pepelea-Vardi. And after so much restraint, the finale’s lingering optimism makes it truly feel like an arrival.

From those gray tones of subtlety — sometimes searing gray, if that’s possible — to those occasional vivid colors of expression, the ensemble skillfully captured this fascinating piece to finish off a strong program.

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