

The Jerusalem Quartet: another Chamber Music Society gem (May 2)

by Kevin McLaughlin



A great string quartet, it is said, plays as one: four players and sixteen strings channeled as a single instrument, even as each player worth his or her own salt retains something distinctive. Time and rehearsals, with luck and hard work, will result in a convincingly melded whole.

The Jerusalem Quartet plays with a remarkably blended, superbly unified voice. On Tuesday evening, May 2 at Disciples Christian Church,

unity was in evidence in a splendid program of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Bartók — another gem in the Cleveland Chamber Music Society's series.

The quartet is an established presence at CCMS, with Tuesday's being their tenth appearance in Cleveland since 2013. Happily, the Jerusalem will appear here next year as well, and in 2024-25 they're scheduled to present the entire cycle of Shostakovich quartets.

Before composing his Second String Quartet in F major in 1941, Prokofiev felt some pressure by local arts officials to incorporate folk melodies — not his usual practice — drawn from the northern Caucasus region, a remote corner to which the composer had recently been relocated. Whether Prokofiev was being subversive or sincere, there is power in his unvarnished, almost raw representation. On Tuesday night the Jerusalem leaned into the rawness.

The first movement is organized around two of these folk tunes — the first a relentless march, and the second a playful dance growing heavy-footed and menacing. The players maximized irony with poker faces and hell-bent insistence. Folk music, yes, but not the happy kind. In the Adagio middle movement, a lovely hymn — interrupted by an agitated scherzo — gave the group an excuse to relocate their group timbre and technique to somewhere in the Middle East. Cellist Kyril Zlotnikov sang out a beautiful, shining theme at the highest register of his instrument, while his colleagues countered with quiet trills and arabesques. The ensemble had plenty of energetic drive left for the finale, an ostensibly gleeful and boisterous outdoor dance.

The performance of Shostakovich's Tenth Quartet, like that of the Prokofiev, did not shy from its harshest or sunniest natures. Maybe because it is Shostakovich, you didn't really know whether the dainty march at the beginning was sincere or hiding something. But as he did all evening, first violinist Alexander Pavlovsky made committed choices, setting the tone and tempo, and keeping it. The swift *sul ponticello* tremolos in the middle section neither wavered nor lost mystery.

The second movement, a scherzo, had the entire ensemble to thank for its vitality and fierceness — the brutal accents in low strings, when they came, startled everyone. The group's rendering of the Adagio third movement, one of Shostakovich's most sublime passacaglias, left no one unmoved. Cellist Kyril Zlotnikov, keeper of the passacaglia flame, played each repetition in flexible conformity to the variations around him. And violist Ori Kam finessed his bow for the right amount of piquancy as a counter to the perky theme in the finale.

The emotional high point of the evening was the performance of Bartók's *String Quartet No. 6*. Like the other works on this program, Bartók's was written during a period of external and personal turmoil. In 1939 he was on the verge of leaving his country for America, and his mother, with whom he felt an intense bond, was dying.

Kam captured the aching lament that opens the work and connects its movements, and the Jerusalem brought a precision and imagination to match Bartók's. In the second movement, "Marcia," the quartet wailed with Roma character. The peasant dance, "Burletta," allowed players to let loose with intoxicated glissandi, and gave instructions for Sergei Bresler, on second, to play his licks a quarter-step flat.

The final "Mesto" was unspeakably sad. The movement concluded the concert — as it does Bartók's quartet cycle — not with a bang, but a whisper. One last viola iteration of the movement's theme, muted responses from violins, and strummed chords in the cello left despair unresolved. There was nothing left for the Jerusalem Quartet to do but to draw the curtain and send its audience out into the night to ponder the imponderable.

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