

## ENCORE: Cavani String Quartet & Mwatabu Okantah (June 10)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Music and poetry augmented one another on Saturday, June 10 at the Akron Public Library.

This much-anticipated concert on the ENCORE Chamber Music Institute series featured the impeccable playing of the Cavani String Quartet and infectious recitations by Mwatabu Okantah, poet and Professor of Pan-African

Studies at Kent State University. Alongside standard repertory, the Cavani performed several Americana-inflected string quartets to the words of Okantah, providing a moving amalgam of words and music.

The Cavani (violinists Annie Fullard and Catherine Cosbey, violist Eric Wong, and cellist Kyle Price) led off with a passionate interpretation of Webern's *Langsamer Satz*, a late Romantic work that puts us on notice that the clock is ticking for the music of its ilk. It was played full throttle by the players — especially by Fullard who, with long bow strokes and a robust vibrato, led with particular confidence. There were also moments of stillness and the Cavani lingered over them, as if wishing to stay in the rosy past.

Fullard introduced the concept of the “collages” of music and poetry that followed. The convergence of the two art forms worked very well, resulting in a history lesson and a kind of artistic fusion that superseded both the music and poetry on their own. Okantah, an effective storyteller and performer, was by turns engaging, funny, and heartbreaking.

Each of the quartets by Antonín Dvořák, Béla Bartók, Merry Peckham, and Jessie Montgomery served to sharpen Okantah's words. The union of the Langston Hughes

suite of poems *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) with the music of Dvořák's *String Quartet No. 12*, "American" (1893) was particularly poignant, recalling the influence of Harry T. Burleigh, who taught Dvořák spirituals in New York. The group has a fine cellist in Kyle Price, who produces a lithe and flexible tone. His solos in *Precious Lord*, Okantah/Peckham's moving tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., drew a veil of sadness just before intermission.

Selections from Cécile Chaminade's *Album des Enfants*, arranged by the Cavani, seemed a little lightweight following the collages but were played with Gallic humor and fun, including a well-timed violin pizzicato imitating the popping of a champagne cork.

The last work was the Debussy *Quartet in g*, which received a contagiously sensuous reading, with a whiff of mystery too. The slow movement was particularly gentle and mesmerizing. Eric Wong contributed greatly — his may be the warmest viola sound in Northeast Ohio and he has no trouble driving the bus when called upon.

Overall, the Cavani String Quartet is as polished as fine silver — expressive and as sensitive to this program's shifting musical styles as a listener could hope for. The Quartet is undeniably led by first violinist Annie Fullard, whose burnished sound and musical will dominate like a soloist, and I kept wishing for a more egalitarian relationship of roles, especially between the two violins. The inclusion of Okantah as collaborator in this concert was an inspiration, as was the choice of repertoire for the extremely effective collages.

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