

**ChamberFest Cleveland:  
“Es muss sein” — it must be (June 29)**

by Kevin McLaughlin



Fate — as represented by “Es muss sein” (it must be), Beethoven’s enigmatic motto tucked in the last movement of the *String Quartet No. 16 in F* — was the guiding light for ChamberFest’s program on Thursday evening, June 29 at CIM’s Mixon Hall. A passage from Milan Kundera’s book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was read aloud by co-artistic director Roman Rabinovich, who went on to explain the text’s Beethoven reference and how it aligns with the Festival’s overall *Lightness* theme. In addition to the Beethoven, works included Lera Auerbach’s compact *Piano Trio No. 1* and the monumental Piano Quintet by Sergey Taneyev.

What seems by now to be ChamberFest’s “inevitability” of excellence also played a role. Like some sort of magic trick, each disparately assembled group — mostly made up of musicians who don’t frequently play together — conjured miracles of coalescence in every work.

Diana Cohen (violin), Julie Albers (cello), and Michael Stephen Brown (piano) maximized Lera Auerbach’s brief *Piano Trio No. 1*. Volatile and oddly interior, Auerbach’s music is remarkably eventful for such a succinct piece. A prelude has the piano tiptoeing around before strings comment with disembodied harmonic figures, sounding at one point like a flock of seagulls. Cohen and Albers were martinetts of rhythm, in lockstep with Brown. Striking was the frequency of wispy *sul ponticello* passages (bowing on the bridge), creating a spectrum of color and an eerie effect, as if the strings were summoning spirits. The final Presto, a bolt out of the second-movement grayness, was played dangerously fast.

A duality of lightness and weightiness guided the performance of Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 16*, as played by Daniel Chong and Amy Schwarz Moretti (violins), Jessica Bodner (viola), and Jay Campbell (cello). Bodner made us all chuckle with her flirtatious viola motives in the first movement. The second-movement scherzo was a giddy game of hide-the-bar-line, delighting and stupefying those of us who like to keep track of such things. Chong's syncopated leaps in the Trio, and the "sticking" five-note sequence from the lower strings (repeated 48 times!), also gave us a reason to laugh.

The players blended their sound with remarkable homogeneity of expression in the Lento movement. How to explain the sudden appearance of this deeply affecting hymn? What is Beethoven saying? Maybe it's not a riddle to be answered (as critics seem to like to do, especially with late Beethoven), but simply music to be enjoyed. The final movement, too, benefitted from the ensemble's unity of sound and purpose. Whatever Beethoven may have meant by the inscription "Der schwer gefasste Entschluss" (the hard-won resolution) or the nagging questions and answers (Must it be? It must be!), surely the ensemble's achieved artistic aims — an integrated, satisfying representation of Beethoven at his most assured — superseded all.

The emotional highpoint was Taneyev's *Piano Quintet in g*, played by Daniel Chong and James Thompson (violins), Teng Li (viola), Julie Albers (cello), and Michael Stephen Brown (piano). Though written in 1910-11, the music has long been out of print, and performances are relatively rare, so it was a treat to hear it Thursday night.

A serious, big-boned work, occupying all of the second half at nearly 45 minutes, its self-conscious monumentality (first and third movements) was tempered by startling tenderness (second movement) and ultimate rapture. Brown proved a good Taneyev surrogate, acing all pianistic tests, though without neglecting his chamber music responsibilities. Li's viola sound was ravishing, and Albers' cello solos were beautifully paced and expressive. The final moments from everyone were electrifying.

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