

## Cleveland Chamber Music Society: Belcea Quartet at Disciples (Oct. 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



Patrons of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society attending the season opener with the Belcea Quartet at Disciples Church on October 17 found Schubert's E-flat Quartet stickered over with Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 4 in their printed programs.

The reason? The Belcea were welcoming Suyeon Kang as their new second violinist this season, and wanted to take the Beethoven out for a final spin before playing it in New York's Zankel Hall at Carnegie Hall two days later.

Last Tuesday's performance also introduced Disciples as the default venue for CCMS's 74th season, and the space gets high marks for its accessibility and clear, transparent acoustic — as well as for its comfortable seating (no pews).

That acoustic supported the Belcea's outstanding playing. This is a quartet of refinement whose pianissimos were audible, whose blend was exquisite, and whose dynamic contrasts and color changes came across beautifully in the space. While Plymouth's three-quarter-round balcony gave the impression of physical intimacy, Disciples manages to embrace the audience in sound.

Both passionate and hefty, witty and sprightly, Belcea's reading of Beethoven's c-minor Quartet gave not a hint of a recent personnel change. And Dvořák's Op. 51 Quartet that followed conveyed the impression of a cheerful day spent picnicking in the forest, even when the mood suddenly turned elegiac in a Slavic *dumka*.

There was a time when Bartók's string quartets posed bracing challenges for performers. Negotiating their musical content and special effects has now become

second nature for ensembles like the Belcea, and audiences can now fully appreciate the beauty of the composer's complex harmonies and enjoy his humorous details.

After intermission, in the opening Allegro of the Fifth Quartet, the Belcea dug into Bartók's lines with energy and fire, and teased out the ambient sounds of the second-movement "night music." They stunningly tossed off the "Bulgarian" Scherzo with its bold leaps, churning bass lines, and slides. The eventful Finale ended in a thrilling burst of cacophony.

Egged on by two fellow string quartets in the audience, who helped turn an already enthusiastic ovation into rhythmic clapping, the Belcea gave the crowd a substantial bonus piece: the slow movement of the Debussy Quartet.

Played with the same attention to detail that the ensemble had earlier lavished on Beethoven, Dvořák, and Bartók, the Debussy validated the Belcea's Most Favored Quartet status with the Cleveland Chamber Music Society. A terrific way to begin their new season.

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