

## Danish String Quartet at Cleveland Chamber Music Society (Nov. 14)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Could the prodigiously talented players of the Danish String Quartet all be drinking from some magic source? By now among the world's finest quartets — perhaps taking the top rung left by the Emerson Quartet after their recent retirement — they perform with such easy excellence and intuitive musical consensus that you wonder: is this the product of hard work and long hours of rehearsal, or some magic potion?

Neither strain nor sweat were visible in the program for the Cleveland Chamber Music Society on November 14 at Disciples Christian Church, which included works by Mozart, Britten, Adès, and their own folk arrangements.

The group's serendipitous formation and later success could be maddening for anyone wishing to follow in their footsteps. The three Danes (Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, violins, and Asbjørn Nørgaard, viola) met as teenagers at a music/soccer camp nearly fifteen years ago, and Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin joined them in 2015. While Sørensen and Sjölin acknowledged their good luck during a pre-concert interview, they also stressed the quartet's hard work: before and during tours they work together for long hours in “democratically prodded” rehearsals.

But their career seemed to unfold on its own. Did they map it out? Not really. It was helpful that they all like playing this repertoire and like each other personally. That makes touring a lot easier.

The Mozart Divertimento, K. 138 is music for friends, and the Quartet highlighted both the enjoyment of performing it and the youthful exuberance of the composer (Mozart was just fifteen when he wrote it). The genre, prior to more formal categorization around 1780, was generally “diverting” music, in the sense of light, possibly outdoor, or even

background music for some social event. Serious was the energy and precision put into it by the Danes in the outer movements, while the lyrical slow movement was pretty, but plain and folk-like, possibly presaging the folk music to come on the second half.

Thomas Adès' challenging second quartet, *The Four Quarters*, Op. 28, was the gravitational center of the first half, and here Øland took up first violin, swapping with Sørensen. The title refers to different times of the day over a 24-hour period, but the piece is also one of Adès' magic tricks of sound: what we see is often misdirected by what we hear, the instruments producing uncharacteristic or surprising sounds.

In Nørgaard's excellent remarks from the stage, he pointed out the descriptive character of the first two movements — stars twinkling, raindrops falling — as contrasted with the more abstract portrayal of time passing in the final two movements.

“Nightfalls” describes two contrasting tonal planes — high twinkling notes in the violins and low, earth-bound tones in the viola and cello. A clockwork feeling in the “long-short-short” violin pattern keeps the diurnal theme.

In “Morning Dew” dripping pizzicati alternate with sudden bow strokes. Sørensen opened “Days” with a syncopated ostinato, and the other players, initial keepers of an imprecise clock, were forced into lockstep at the movement's climax.

The last movement, “The Twenty-Fifth Hour,” was described by Nørgaard as putting the listener in an imaginary realm — an extra “twenty-fifth” hour of the day that we all wish we had. The performers' ease in negotiating Adès' complex patterns of time was a testament to their polish as an ensemble. In fact, the sense of disguised challenge was a pervasive element throughout the program, as the players seemed less concerned with technical display than with honest accountings of each work.

Britten's *Three Divertimenti* was true to its “pleasing entertainment” purpose. The March moves from “disorganized fanfare” to parody. The Waltz is more graceful. Then comes a dazzling Burlesque, wildly absurd, and full of color and fun.

Intermission was followed by a selection of folk music, all announced by Sørensen (who moonlights as a folk musician with another group in Denmark), which seemed to relax everyone. The playlist featured several settings from Denmark, Sweden, and Ireland, many melancholic, all of them truly beautiful. We all went home humming the encore, Elvis' *Can't Help Falling in Love*.

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