

Cleveland Chamber Music Society Welcomes The Dover Quartet March 12

by Mike Telin



Part of the Cleveland Chamber Music Society’s mission is to present ensembles who are at the beginning of their careers. “We’re always looking at young ensembles that have gotten management and have won chamber music competitions,” Steve Somach, the head of CCMS’s program committee said in an interview with this publication.

One example is The Dover Quartet, who, after having won the grand prize and three special prizes at the 2013 Banff

International String Quartet Competition, made their debut on the series in May of 2016. On Tuesday, March 12 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, The Dovers — Joel Link and Bryan Lee (violins), Juliann Lee (viola), and Camden Shaw (cello) — will make their fourth appearance on the Chamber Music Society’s series with a program of music by Joaquín Turina, Leoš Janáček, and Franz Schubert. Tickets are available [online](#).

“This is one of my favorite programs of our season,” Camden Shaw said during a Zoom conversation. “I like that it’s an exploration of psychology and how we wrestle with our demons.”

The cellist said that Janáček’s *String Quartet No. 2* (“Intimate Letters”) is not about love but rather infatuation and obsession taken to an unhealthy degree. “Then there’s Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden,” which is obviously trying to reconcile our desire for life with the knowledge that it cannot go on forever. And Turina’s *The Bullfighter’s Prayer* is about someone preparing to do something that might end their life — and prayer is probably not the worst idea if you’re about to fight a bull.”

Shaw recalled his first experience of hearing “Intimate Letters” as a student at Music@Menlo. “The Pacifica Quartet was playing it and students often had to listen to the performances from the staircase — it’s a very small room. We didn’t have programs, so I didn’t know what it was, and I completely thought that it was a modern piece or had been commissioned for the festival. It is that inventive and fresh, and Janáček’s language is so unique — I can’t think of any composer who continued along those lines quite in that way.”

Shaw described “Death and the Maiden,” as being musically straightforward but surprisingly difficult to execute. “It’s funny how a lot of this 40-minute piece plays itself in the sense that it’s a story. And once you’re in the story, you’re as captivated as the audience is, and it goes by in a blink. There are spots that just require so much effort, but I absolutely love working on it and it never grows old. There’s just something about it that’s so effective, so honest and emotive. It’s an immense piece for sure.”

Although it’s only 10 minutes long, *The Bullfighter’s Prayer* is full of vivid imagery. “It’s interesting because what you’ll hear at the beginning are the sounds of the crowded arena, but it’s all very quiet. Turina creates the sense that you’re hearing the roar of the crowd and stereotypical Spanish sounding melodies, but they’re all at a distance.”

Turning the topic of our conversation to the Dover Quartet itself, its honors include an Avery Fisher Career Grant, Chamber Music America’s Cleveland Quartet Award, and Lincoln Center’s Hunt Family Award. The Dovers also serve as Ensemble in Residence at the Curtis Institute of Music and holds residencies at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University and the Walton Arts Center’s Artosphere festival. Over the next three months they will be spending quite a bit of time on the road. Since making their CCMS debut, the Dover Quartet has become one of the world’s most in-demand chamber ensembles.

“I’m so grateful for the elements in our lives that have gone so well,” Shaw said. “Call it luck or whatever you will, we’ve been very fortunate, and I constantly feel very grateful. I do appreciate how my relationship with music has changed since we began and one of the immense benefits I now have is stability, for lack of a better word. But I do feel like I’m getting to do my hobby. It doesn’t feel like I’m going to a job and that’s very wonderful.”

With the departure of violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, the Quartet has experienced its first personnel change. Shaw said that the selection of a new member is a big decision for everyone, including the person who is joining. “It’s a very specific life to sign up for. It’s very busy — we’re about to go on tour for basically three months. And by the time people are in their 30s, they have already built lives, or at least they’ve started to. So

finding someone who's willing to love the idea of a quartet life is not easy. We're so grateful that Julianne Lee was willing to commit to us — she's a marvelous addition to the team.”

As an educator, Shaw said that while many students love the idea of life in a quartet, it's important to talk about the commitment that it takes. How does he convey this to students? “That's a great question, and maybe if we talk again in eight or ten years — as I gain more experience at being an educator — I'll have a different answer. But I'm a little torn because on the one hand, if a student comes to me and genuinely says, ‘I'm concerned about the realistic aspects of a career in music, financial aspects, stability aspects, we'll have a really honest conversation. On the other hand, I do think that an 18-year old may not be ready to, and perhaps shouldn't worry about that too much. If they are talented and working hard, they should concentrate on playing the first two bars of Schubert *Arpeggione* as beautifully as possible, which is a monumental task. So in a way, it's kind of good to maybe keep some of the lions at bay when you're an undergrad, so that you have that space mentally.”

Shaw noted that the conversation around quality of life versus financial stability is not unique to music. “Every career comes with that question but we do have to have the conversation. If a student wants to talk about it I certainly won't hold back. You have to be honest.”

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