

Dover Quartet at Cleveland Chamber Music Society (Mar. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



On March 12, near the beginning of their 14-city North American tour, the Dover Quartet returned to Cleveland to plumb the depths of a rich selection of programmatic pieces on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights.

The audience was swelled by a large contingent of students from the Elyria High School Orchestra, who listened attentively from the church's balconies and received a first-class lesson in ensemble playing from

one of the finest string quartets in the business.

Joaquín Turina introduced the evening's theme of impressionistic musical narratives with his "Bullfighter's Prayer" (*La oración del torero*), a charming piece that captures not only the emotions of a matador before his encounter in the bull ring, but also sets the listener's imagination in motion by including sound snippets of the crowd as they wait for the event to begin.

Originally intended for a quartet of Spanish folk lutes but later adapted by the composer for string quartet and for string orchestra, the piece retains something of that popular Iberian character, especially in the hands of this ensemble.

The Dovers should be given exclusive rights to perform Leoš Janáček's Second Quartet — they completely own this unique work that they also played in 2016 on their CCMS debut. Chronicling the largely epistolary May-December romance between the 63-year-old composer and a 26-year-old Moravian woman in four "Intimate Letters," as the piece is nicknamed, bringing music to bear on a complicated situation where mere words fail.

The quartet's new violist, Julianne Lee, shone in her central role in the musical narrative, joining violinists Joel Link and Bryan Lee and cellist Camden Shaw in rapidly-shifting mood and tempo changes and a plethora of emotional contrasts and cries of anguish. (It would have been interesting to hear her play that element of the drama on a viola d'amore, as Janáček originally intended.)

The drama culminates in the last movement, which begins as a folk dance, but morphs into a nightmare, then into a lullaby, then into a crazed conclusion that leaves the listener marooned on an inconclusive dissonance.

The evening ended with Franz Schubert's *Quartet No. 14*, based in part on the composer's own tragic song *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, which features another dialogue, this time between a young girl and Death in a poem by Matthias Claudius.

The Dovers sustained the energy of the grand opening right up to its sudden, calm coda. In the second-movement variations on Schubert's song, they achieved wonderful lyrical playing as they passed the melody around. The short scherzo that followed was highlighted by crisp articulations.

Persistent, tireless *tarantella* rhythms pressed the finale toward an energetic conclusion that found the ensemble consistently on top of its game. But Schubert wasn't about to end this quartet on a happy note — the music remained solidly in d-minor through the final cadence.

The Dovers received a well-deserved, enthusiastic ovation for their technically faultless and tirelessly expressive playing this evening. Let's hope that they can keep up that energy so that audiences in Indianapolis, Palm Desert, CA, Los Angeles, Winston-Salem, State College, Charlottesville, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Aliso Viejo, CA, Toronto, New York, and Austin can enjoy equally superlative performances during April and May.

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