

Kent Blossom: Poiesis Quartet's youthful energy abounds (July 10)

by Peter Feher



It's not just the student performances at this year's Kent Blossom Music Festival that are infused with youthful energy.

The Wednesday, July 10 faculty concert in Ludwig Recital Hall brimmed with optimistic, enthusiastic music-making. The Poiesis Quartet, the string ensemble-in-residence at Kent Blossom this summer (a role filled in previous seasons by the venerable Miami String Quartet), has been together for less than two years. Yet this fresh-faced group — violinists Sarah Ma and Max Ball, violist Jasper de Boor, and cellist Drew

Dansby, all recent alums of Oberlin Conservatory — already plays like an ensemble with a long and storied history.

Certainly, the Poiesis Quartet has racked up enough awards in the past eighteen months, including the grand prize at the 2023 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, to count as eminent. But what really distinguishes the group is its collective sound, which is remarkable and, one might almost say, old-fashioned — rich from top to bottom in a wonderfully uncompromising way.

That strength was on full display in the ensemble's Kent Blossom recital. The substantial, ambitious program consisted entirely of numbered quartets, pieces that may appear unassuming in name but can nonetheless come to vivid life in performance.

And in truth, the composers supplied no shortage of colorful material. Kevin Lau's *String Quartet No. 3* opened the evening with a whirl of musical references and extended string techniques. Both movements of his 2014 piece draw on multiple sources. There's the blending of Eastern and Western influences in the first section, "Gliding," and then the cross-genre journey from Baroque to electronica in the second, "Winds of Change."

The Poiesis Quartet was a unified front throughout, whether in lush melodic lines together or in passages that evoked a thumping dance beat.

These stylings couldn't help but rub off on the next work on the program, Johannes Brahms' *String Quartet No. 3* in B-flat. The cross-rhythms in the composer's first-movement *Vivace* seemed to grind and groove here, as if EDM was still echoing somewhere in the background. Subtler effects in subsequent movements — the muted section in the *Agitato*, for example — sounded no less sensational.

The artistic ambition was dialed up after intermission with a performance of Joe Hisaishi's *String Quartet No. 1*. Hisaishi, best known for his charming music for the Studio Ghibli animated films (such as *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*, among many others), has crafted a chamber score that's neither easy nor cinematic.

Rather, his 2014 quartet is deliberately static and pictorial, each movement inspired by a print by M.C. Escher (images of the accompanying artwork were projected on a small screen to the side of the stage on Wednesday). The Poiesis Quartet was up for the challenge of presenting the piece, which in its intricate rhythms resembles nothing so much as an interlocking puzzle. Only in the fourth and final movement, "Other World," did the group's cohesion somewhat falter.

But the ensemble was back in top form, tightening up into a single unit once more, for the last work of the evening, Eleanor Alberga's *String Quartet No. 2*. This 1994 composition, pulsing with the rhythms of Afro-Caribbean dance music and unfolding in one continuous movement, requires energy in abundance, and the Poiesis Quartet had plenty left to give.

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