

Recording review: Poiesis Quartet fearlessly forges something new (Bright Shiny Things)

by Stephanie Manning



Creating something new can come with a lot of expectations. Founding an ensemble. Releasing a debut album. Recording a world premiere, or two. But whatever you might expect from the Poiesis Quartet, they want you to take them exactly as they are.

It might sound like quite the proclamation for the young string quartet, founded two years ago at Oberlin Conservatory by violinists Sarah Ma and Max Ball, violist Jasper de Boor, and cellist Drew Dansby. But their debut recording, *as we are* — to be released on October 18 — sees the four players completely confident in themselves and the music

they're performing.

The name “Poiesis,” from the ancient Greek ποιᾶν, refers to this act of making what has never been made before. Accordingly, the two pieces on the album are each world premiere recordings (though each have had multiple live performances). Both works also have strong ties to Northeast Ohio, with one by Baldwin Wallace composer-in-residence Clint Needham and the other by Cleveland Orchestra trombonist Richard Stout.

Needham's *String Quartet No. 1*, “Shades of Green,” dates back to 2005, and the Quartet proves that an official recording has been overdue. Its often melancholic and contemplative nature speaks to its origins as poetry, and the group's performance sweepingly conjures up the image of the composer sitting under a tree, the wind on his face, writing while watching the leaves blow.

The combined forces of violist Jasper de Boor and cellist Drew Dansby in the faster middle movement add an almost bottomless depth to the group's sound. And the ethereal outer movements, filled with long, repeated notes, are rendered even more so by the recording quality. The audio work fully captures the gorgeous resonance of both the group and the venue — Federated Church in Chagrin Falls — thanks to the efforts of

Grammy Award-winning producer Elaine Martone, audio engineer Gintas Norvila, and mastering engineer Jennifer Nulsen.

The transition between the album's two works occurs so smoothly that Needham's work almost resembles an instrumental overture to what follows. Richard Stout's *Songs of Correspondence* draws on the Quartet's strengths in similar ways, but this time paired with a mezzo-soprano. Nancy Maulsby lends a rich, mature sound to the text of eleven letters by the author Willa Cather, imbuing Cather's words with passion and wisdom.

The perspective is one-sided, with each movement named for the letter's recipient, so the strings paint vivid pictures of the experiences Cather describes — like the quirky imitations of Mexican dances, tin cans, and old shoes in “Elsie.” Maulsby skillfully draws out the different facets of the author's personality, whether that's asserting herself to her publishers with a dose of wry humor (“Alfred”) or consoling a grieving young widow (“Zoë”). The singer's agile voice complements Cather's looping cursive, her crisp diction like the flick of a pen that ends a word.

Two of the most pivotal moments come during “Edith” and “Roscoe,” written to some of Cather's closest people. Multiple quartet members spin out romantic solos in the former, the only surviving letter written to Cather's lover, while the latter waxes nostalgic on the author's childhood memories with her brother. It was Roscoe, it turns out, who told his sister that “we must take each other as we are.”

As the album comes to a close, Stout's music leaves the listener to ruminate on what that statement means to them. “If more families lived up to it,” Cather's text muses, “there would be a good deal more peace in the world.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 10, 2024.

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