

Tuesday Musical: the show must go on (Mar. 4)

by Kevin McLaughlin



This will be one of the stories the Isidore Quartet will tell in their dotage. At about 10 pm, the night before their Tuesday Musical performance in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall on March 4, the quartet's violist Devin Moore came down with a case of strep throat.

As might only happen in a region brimming with musical talent, Eva Kennedy — violist of the Callisto Quartet

and a former classmate of Isidore violinist Phoenix Avalon — happened to be in Columbus and was available. The next morning, Kennedy drove up to Akron to rehearse with Isidore and pianist Jeremy Denk. As they say, the show must go on.

Despite the disappointment of half of the program needing to be changed, the substituted works — four Bach fugues (from *The Art of Fugue*) and Mozart's great *String Quartet No. 19 in C*, "Dissonance," K.465 — made for a surprisingly agreeable switcharoo. The scheduled Brahms *Piano Quintet in f* remained in place. (If and when the Isidore returns to Northeast Ohio, I hope they'll re-program Gabriella Smith's amazing *Carrot Revolution*.)

Far from sounding like academic exercises, the contrapuncti of Bach's *Art of Fugue* unfolded with quiet, poignant grandeur. In the first fugue, each overlapping voice built a grand edifice until they suddenly arrested, like a heart attack, in the penultimate bars. The boost in tempo in the second, and inversion of subjects in the third and fourth, only increased the drama.

Mozart's *String Quartet in C*, "Dissonance," takes its name not from Mozart but from the twenty or so bars of its introductory Adagio, which was the subject of much criticism and controversy at the time of its composition in 1785. The debate focused on the "strange" introduction, with critics decrying "errors of harmony and counterpoint."

Isidore's violinist Adrian Steele shared one additional nugget: that an eighteenth-century critic, not content to merely criticize, went so far as to write an "improved" version of Mozart's opening bars, and then boasted about how easy it was to fix.

The opening on Tuesday was as startling as ever, unstable harmony and creeping chromaticism growing out of the imperturbable eighth notes from Joshua McClendon's noble cello. One after another, instruments entered in quiet, vibrato-less strands to emphasize the chaos, before shifting to sunny C Major at the Allegro.

The wild forays of sixteenth notes by first violinist Phoenix Avalon were made even wilder by the group's overall Apollonian restraint. Melodic lines, especially in the slow movement, evoked a shy kind of beauty, not flaunting itself but content to be noticed if you had a mind to. The last movement was the most risky — swift and technically daunting — but clearly held no terrors for these players.

After intermission, pianist Jeremy Denk joined the quartet for a performance of escalating potency of the Brahms *Piano Quintet in f*. Originally conceived as a string quintet with two cellos, the work soon morphed into a sonata for two pianos before achieving final form as a piano quintet.

The ensemble was united in color and virtuosity. Denk was first among equals rather than the dominant force, preferring group balance to individual spotlight. The strings were rosier-cheeked than they had been in the first half of the program, opting for a heartier vibrato and overall volume than in the Bach or Mozart. One may have wished for a richer, more burnished tone, but let's blame the acoustics of E.J. Thomas Hall, which seemed to sap resonance rather than enhance it.

The slow movement was a welcome contrast in its gentle cantabile. Although, for me, it was the third movement scherzo that served as the emotional highpoint. The cello ostinato and forward-leaning syncopations inserted drive, with the trio section offering a bloom of lyricism. A skeletal recitative opened the finale and mesmerizing urgency established itself, guiding the five toward a unified and exhilarating close.

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