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Escher String Quartet at Cleveland Chamber Music Society (Oct. 13)

by Kevin McLaughlin



The Escher String Quartet — violinists Adam Barnett-Hart and Bryan Lee, violist Pierre Lapointe, and cellist Brook Speltz — presented three very different works in its Cleveland Chamber Music Society debut on October 13 at the Cultural Arts Center at Disciples Church.

Their approach might be summed up as "combine and conquer" — four distinct musical personalities joined in a rich, unified sound, punctuated by flashes of individual intensity.

They began with Haydn's *String Quartet in G major*, Op. 76, No. 1, full of his characteristic mischief. Three emphatic opening chords suggested a theatrical announcement, followed by a fugue-like game of hide-and-seek. The players relished Haydn's jokes, giving the sudden unisons and biting dissonances plenty of juice.

The "Adagio sostenuto" began with hymn-like warmth before giving way to romance in a love duet between Speltz's cello and Barnett-Hart's violin. Their lyrical exchanges made the darker passages to come all the more affecting. Haydn's mischief resurfaced in the "Menuetto," marked "Presto," where he turns a courtly dance into something approaching a scherzo. The players took him at his speedy word, exaggerating the deliberately unsteady rhythms, while the rustic, Ländler-like Trio offered charm but little rest.

The pace scarcely slackened in the "Allegro non troppo." The Escher made the most of its theatrical contrasts, carrying the music from a stern G minor opening through restless chromatic passages to an exuberant G major conclusion.

Erich Korngold's *String Quartet No. 3* brought a different kind of theatricality. Before the performance, Speltz introduced the composer's Hollywood career and his use of film themes in the quartet. Anticipating audience resistance, he joked that at least Brahms would follow after intermission.

As it turned out, Korngold needed little apology. Begun in 1944, the Third Quartet draws on both his Viennese late-Romantic inheritance and his film music, and the Escher found coherence in its extravagant contrasts.

The chromatic opening was disorienting, with Barnett-Hart and Lee sharing the argument as Lapointe and Speltz added depth and unease. Strangeness gave way to drama, then, impossibly, to D major serenity in the final bar. The "Scherzo" quickly dispelled that calm with spiky, precise gestures. And just as suddenly, a lush Trio appeared, its music associated with Korngold's score for *Between Two Worlds*. It was like stumbling onto a Warner Bros. backlot.

The slow movement, *Sostenuto: Like a Folk Tune*, draws on a love theme from *The Sea Wolf* (1941). Its simple melody gradually gathers intensity, and here Barnett-Hart came into his own. In the central *Appassionato*, he played as if possessed, bringing fierce urgency to the music over the agitated accompaniment. The finale restored the quartet's more restless character, with the Escher holding Korngold's sharp accents and sweeping melodies together through firm tempos and rhythmic drive.

After Korngold's volatility, Brahms's *String Quartet in A minor*, Op. 51, No. 2, brought a welcome change of perspective. The Escher gave the opening movement both poise and urgency, keeping its intricate counterpoint distinct as the music pressed toward an impassioned conclusion. That same clarity served the "Andante moderato," where the players shaped the songlike melody warmly, sharpened the agitated Hungarian second theme, and gave Speltz's cello solo room to speak.

The "Quasi Menuetto" was ideally paced, its melancholy set against a fleet, playful middle section before the minuet's well-judged return. In the finale, the quartet brought Brahms's rhythmic ingenuity to life, emphasizing displaced accents and two-against-three rhythms while keeping the contrapuntal imitations audible amid the bustle. The musicians drove the stretto coda at breakneck speed for an exhilarating finish.

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