

By Harold Duckett
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Review: Borealis String Quartet engages visually as well

With all the excitement the Borealis String Quartet has created across Canada, one might think they were sporophytic reproductions of Glenn Gould.

Watching (one watches the Borealis as intently as one listens) them play at Pollard Auditorium in Oak Ridge on Saturday night, they might be.

While first violinist Patricia Shih provides what resembles choreographic interpretations of the music they play, all four of them (2nd violinist Yuel Yawney, cellist Shih-Lin Chen and violist Nikita Pogrebnoy being the other three) lean in as they whisper little passages to each other as if they don't want the audience to hear, such as in the third movement of Beethoven's 1809 "String Quartet in E Flat Major," Op. 74.

Had such moments not been preceded by the quartet's committed playing of the opening movement, with its emphatic exclamation notes, as well as the ebb and flow of the contemplative, "adagio ma non troppo," second movement, one could have thought they didn't know an audience was there.

The third movement brought gorgeous moments of discussion and agreement before the fourth movement's whirlwind conclusion.

A storm of another sort was stirred up with Kelly-Marie Murphy's "Ashes." Commissioned in 2008 by the Borealis, it flares up into a conflagration, generating glissando winds that pick up little particles one hears in pizzicato notes in the violins and viola.

Grieg's "String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 27," written in 1878, was music in an entirely different color.

The Borealis delivered its pastoral landscapes, folk song influences and gorgeous harmonies with lovely, flowing passages, offset at times with complex double stopping moments, especially in the emotionally frantic first movement.

Then, as if to say it's time to rest, the quartet finished the concert with an encore of a rich, melodic arrangement of the spiritual "Deep River," arranged by composed Alfred Pochon, founding second violinist of the Flonzaley Quartet.

Part of the movement to lead art music concerts away from the tradition of classical musicians being heard but not seen, the Borealis forces the listener to become as visually engaged with their music.