

Concert Review: Pacifica Quartet in top form

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By Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Not long ago, the Pacifica Quartet was named quartet-in-residence at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The significance of this goes beyond the prestige of the appointment: The legendary Guarneri String Quartet occupied that post for more than four decades. Ultra-talented string quartets abound these days in a golden age for the genre, but the Pacifica Quartet is perhaps most worthy of carrying that mantle today.

Those are big words -- fightin' ones in the passionate world of chamber music. But after hearing the American ensemble again at Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland Monday night, it's hard not to be caught up in its brilliance. In a program of heavyweights, Pacifica floated like a butterfly and, well, you know the rest.

But truly this is a quartet light on its feet. Presented by the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society, the program was Beethoven's Quartet in F major (Op. 18, No. 1), Shostakovich's Quartet No. 5 in B-flat major and Schubert's Quartet in D minor, "Death and the Maiden."

From the beginning, the group's sunny vivaciousness, tonal coloring and emotional honesty brought out the music vividly. I don't know a quartet that excels at so many different aspects of music-making, from thrilling furious passages to exquisitely quiet moments to lyrical bliss, all played in a (seemingly) relaxed style. Lead violinist Simin Ganatra brings a joyful sensibility to the music but sets a stage for the group -- violinist Sibbi Bernhardsson, violist Masumi Per Rostad and cellist Brandon Vamos -- to plumb depths.

Beethoven's first Op. 18 quartet displayed the tension of a composer about to break through the boundaries of the classical style. If the first movement was contrasting, with turn-on-a-dime dynamics, the second offered the softest of edges to the phrasing.

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Shostakovich's Quartet No. 5, a work he hid from Stalin, can be a busy and raw work, but the Pacifica managed to maintain this while never being strident. The second movement conveyed a desolate, lonely landscape.

The group's performance of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" was steeped in heart-pounding drama in the outer movements and gloriously singing in the famous variation on Schubert's own song. Mr. Vamos did so in the cello variation, and all the members, connected by the hip if not the mind, brought life to the opus on death.

A worthy successor indeed.