

Talich Quartet dazzles

By Jane Vranish
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review

The Talich Quartet provided a most elegant opening for the 45th season of the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society, certainly one of the city's foremost musical treasures. One could easily see why the Talich has produced so many critically acclaimed recordings that have placed the group in the thick of things at the topmost level.

Chamber music is, in many ways, the most satisfying of all ensemble playing, a genre where each of the members plays an equally important and musically visible role. Despite some passages that focus on other members of the group, the responsibility most often lies with the first violinist. But after hearing the Talich Quartet, one comes away remembering the inner workings of the music, like a fine Swiss watch that exposes its gears.

This is a quartet that obviously prides itself on an almost tactile blend, where the instruments often make imperceptible entrances before making their presence known, and a creamy texture born of a seamless bow technique. First violinist Jan Talich Jr. was noticeably sensitive to this philosophy, working within the fabric of the music and rarely grabbing the spotlight in the higher registers. Many times he took a back seat to the robust phrasing of second violinist Petr Macecek or violist Vladimir Bukac.

In this most democratic of groups, the whole was definitely greater than the sum of the parts. It was apparent from the start, in

Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, a surprisingly short choice for a chamber series where music appreciation is always placed over time constraints. But the piece immediately got to the heart of the matter. Following the slow opening section, where the Talich presented itself with extraordinary clarity, it moved to the substantial exchanges in the fugue, where cellist Petr Prause led the way for the other members to demonstrate their consistency of sound.

Shostakovich's Eighth Quartet was designed as a memorial to victims of the Russian revolution, which included this composer, who labored under the restrictions of the communist regime. The Talich was sympathetically in tune with the melancholic undertones, only missing out on a sharp edge of frustration in the third movement.

Schubert's final quartet, generally considered his finest and a piece that requires strong performances from every member, capped the evening. While this interpretation didn't have what might be considered a full-blown Romantic sweep, it was a carefully orchestrated performance that was highly satisfying. The Talich articulated not only the most intimate, cat-like moments of the scherzo, but provided a muscular tremolo in the first movement and a wonderfully brisk finale.