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The Power of Sensitivity: The American String Quartet and Menahem Pressler in Munich

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Sensitivity is considered by many to be a sign of weakness. But this view is a gross error, as was demonstrated by the evening of the American String Quartet with the expressive and enduring "Chamber Music Saint" Menahem Pressler in the Herkulessaal. This string quartet was founded in 1974, almost a generation before a phalanx of young groups entered the music scene setting new standards of virtuosity, intensity, perfection and fresh approaches.

But to quote Wagner's Hans Sachs: " Don't underestimate the Masters". The way the Americans presented Haydn's Op.76.3 as a lucid interplay of light and shadow and Beethoven's last quartet op.135 with pastoral F-major strength, filled with relaxed tenderness, subtlety, nobility, transparency, pastel colors and rhythmic movement was a pure revelation. And when you add Menahem Pressler for Dvorak's wondrous Piano Quintet Op. 81, then sound becomes pure music.

The theme of the slow variation movement Poco adagio cantabile from Haydn's Quartet was not only composed as a melody for the Imperial anthem but also later used for Hoffmann von Fallersleben's German national anthem. This wonderful theme was later abused in heavy and military arrangements and their connection with Hitler's Germany and the Second World War.

It was thus almost a joyous shock when the four American's musician's signature clear timbre allowed the Cantilena to unfold with such purity, clarity and perfection that it was suddenly freed of all darker associations.

Now there was nothing to hinder Haydn's somewhat ironic aim of presenting the theme through each of the four instruments' distinctive sounds.

Also in Beethoven's Op.135 nothing was taken for granted. In place of typical late-work speculations they offered a complete musical concept throughout the four movements. Besides the melancholy humor and sudden rage of the Vivace, the four musicians answered the final "difficult question (Muss es sein?)" in joyous irony.

After intermission Dvorak's lyric power was evoked. Rather than the all-too-common confrontation between a thunderous piano and four competitive string instruments, this was music-making of the highest order, born of a unified spirit. The Dumka was the pinnacle of dynamic nuance between piano and strings, while the Scherzo and Finale were played with great "Schwung".

In response to the ovation the musicians gave the Andante from Brahms's Quintet as a moving encore.