

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pacifica Quartet evokes visceral response to works by Ravel, Ligeti and Mozart

November 11, 2014

By: Robert Croan

Is Ravel's String Quartet everyone's favorite piece of chamber music? Probably not, but in any poll it would certainly appear high on the list.

An extraordinary rendition of this popular work Monday evening capped a splendid program by the Pacifica Quartet on Chamber Music Pittsburgh's series in Carnegie Music Hall.

The playing by Pacifica Quartet -- violinists Simin Ganatra and Sibbi Bernhardsson, violist Masumi Per Rostad and cellist Brandon Vamos -- was characterized by immaculate precision, on-the-mark intonation, incisive rhythms and a sense of give-and-take among the participants that made every piece seem like a conversation among the protagonists.

This worked particularly well in the Ravel Quartet, where classical forms vie with splashes of sonic color, and thematic fragments from one movement morph later into new ideas. With the easy rapport of the Pacifica players, it was as if a topic in a discussion had been dropped and then brought back in a different context to be rethought and re-examined.

The familiar Ravel was only one element in a compelling musical sequence by the current quartet-in-residence at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. The evening began with Gyorgy Ligeti's String Quartet No. 1, subtitled "Metamorphoses nocturnes." The Hungarian composer, who died in 2006, wrote this work in the 1950s, though it was suppressed by the Stalinist regime and premiered after the composer fled to the West.

The influence on Ligeti by his compatriot Bartok is evident in the use of strong rhythmic patterns and by explorations of what sounds are possible on the instruments. There is extensive use of high harmonics, playing on the bridge, pizzicato, percussive use of the bow, and much more. The driving rhythms of the second movement, the bizarre waltz that begins the third and the eerie pianissimos that develop into violent outbursts keep the listener

alert to every unexpected happening. That the work's visceral appeal surprised many skeptics was in no small part due to the brilliant, intense performance by this wonderful ensemble.

The two quartets served as framework for another work of agitation, Mozart's String Quintet in G Minor, with Carnegie Mellon faculty violist David Harding filling out the ensemble. Here, the turbulence is of a different nature, more inward, couched in a more elegant musical language, although no less serious in its intent. Mozart writing in the key of G Minor is always intensely emotional, and the G Minor String Quintet is one of his most profound works.

The opening movement depicts "storm and stress," and the minuet anticipates that of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 (in the same key), but the chief glory of this quintet is its third movement Adagio – an exquisite moment of sustained repose and contemplation with an ethereal high violin solo midway unlike anything else in all music. The Pacifica performers were sensitive to every nuance, as well as to the special stylistic requisites, quite different from the demands of the other two pieces on their program. For the seven minutes or so of that Adagio, time seemed to stand still – a realm, perhaps, to which only the miracle of music can transport us.