

The News-Gazette

Two thumbs up for Cincinnati's Ariel Quartet

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The Ariel Quartet, winner of the prestigious Cleveland Quartet Award, offered an excellent concert of chamber music Feb. 8 on the stage of Foellinger Great Hall. This quartet, whose members are violinists Alexandra Kazovsky and Gershon Gerchikov, Jan Grüning on viola and Amit Even-Tov on cello, first got together 16 years ago, when they were students in Israel, and they have played together to their current status as Quartet in Residence at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music.

The three quartets on the program were by such masters of the chamber idiom as Wolfgang Mozart, Johannes Brahms and Bela Bartok. First played was Mozart's Quartet No. 16 in E-Flat major, K. 428, the third in the famous series of six dedicated to Joseph Haydn. It was at a playing in 1783 of these quartets that Haydn delivered his famous encomium to Mozart's father, saying "I tell you that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by name."

This quartet is one of Mozart's more inward and somber works, and the Ariel Quartet played it with strong intensity. In the second movement, Mozart wanders down strange harmonic paths, at times presaging Richard Wagner's music. The Ariel musicians gave this music a strongly Romantic flavor. Mozartean sunshine did not break out until the opening of the third, Menuetto, movement, and the finale drew sparkling playing from the Ariel group as Mozart ended with a humorous ending.

Bartok's Six Quartets are the gold standard of 20th-century quartet writing. These quartets seemed highly experimental when first performed. Craggy the music of the 1934 Quartet No. 5 in B-flat major is, but there is no denying the structural daring and the immense variety of fascinating sounds that Bartok got out of four-stringed instruments. The Ariel Quartet opened up this piece in assault mode. Bartok unleashed a torrent of staccato phrases that surely must have been heard by Shostakovich in Leningrad, and echoed in his Quartets of the 1950s.

The Ariel group played with splendid intensity the "night" (or "nightmare") music of the second and fourth movements. The torrential assault broke out again in the finale, and this quartet made the most of the vulgar segment near the end that seemed to me Bartok's "Bronx Cheer." All in all, it was technically and emotionally a Bartok performance at the highest level. No wonder the Ariels

have won a Hungarian prize for their playing of Bartok.

Although I have long loved Brahms' chamber music, especially the works with piano and strings, and the two Sextets, his String Quartets have largely eluded me. After hearing the Ariels play the Quartet No. 3 in B-Flat Major, Op. 67, I am changing my mind. Composed in 1867 when Brahms, much to his relief, was finishing his First Symphony, it was the composer's favorite among his three works in that form. It begins with a jolly hunting-like theme and the same theme turns up in the final variation of the finale, to charming effect. The second movement drew impassioned playing from this quartet, particularly first violin Kazovsky. In the third movement, marked "agitato," violist Grüning had his long moment of glory, and he played his solo eloquently, as the other three musicians, playing with mutes, provided rich harmonic underpinnings. The finale, with variations, a mixture of sunshine and shadow, saw the Ariels weaving their way to the triumphant final chords. In the strong applause that followed most of those on stage stood in appreciation.

Three distinct styles in the history of chamber music were displayed. I wonder how we in the audience would have felt had they been played chronologically: Mozart, Brahms, Bartok? I give Bartok credit for trying to encompass the dislocations of his tragic time in some state of artistic coherence, but his vision looks toward chaos. The order in which the Ariels played these works gave Bartok pride of place, but allowed Brahms' classicism to offer the consolations of a less tortured time. By the way, among the previous winners of the Cleveland Quartet Award were the Pacifica Quartet (2003) and the Jupiter Quartet (2007). Sound familiar?