

Pacifica Quartet finds common ground with Carter and Beethoven

By Gerald Fisher

The Pacifica Quartet is on a mission. The Bloomington Indiana–based string quartet opened their recital at the University of Chicago’s Logan Center for the Arts Sunday afternoon with a strongly-worded manifesto in favor of ranking Elliott Carter’s First String Quartet among the very greatest chamber works of the last century.

For all the fabled difficulty of the work’s structure, second violinist Sibbi Bernhardsson made a case for the piece representing the same stage in Carter’s works as Beethoven’s “Razumovsky” No. 1 (also on the program) occupies for that composer—namely a game-altering construction that serves as a portal to the future both for the composer and for the genre itself.

Having made the claim, it remained for the sterling instrumentalists (Simin Ganatra, first violinist, Bernhardsson, Masumi Per Rostad, violist and cellist Brandon Vamos) to provide the proof in their performance. In both works the high level of their technical and interpretive achievement spoke volumes for the greatness of the music and the comparison stood the test for the mostly appreciative audience.

Their program opened with the brief quartet by Puccini titled Crisantemi (“Chrysanthemums”). The positioning was likely intended as a light prelude for the strings and for the audience’s ears as the rich traditional harmonics were seldom to be heard in the following Carter piece.

Which is not to say that there are no harmonic felicities in the work. Much is made of the Quartet’s structure—framed with cadenzas at either end and consisting of four contrasting movements—which is subverted by each instrumentalist seemingly going off on their own independently of the others, and only meeting by chance in a complexity of interaction. But there are many sections where they are clearly in tandem with each other and several beautifully lyric interludes.

Two pauses in the proceedings, positioned almost randomly, can orient the attentive listener to where they might be in the work, but for the most part it is easier to listen with the ears rather than with the intellect as the piece unfolds. At the end of approximately 40 minutes, an audience can be said to have had a deep experience not so much emotional as aural, but musically rewarding to the open mind.

The independence and equal weight of the individual instruments seem to come easily to the Pacifica, so there is always an amazing clarity to their interpretation of Carter's music. From beginning to end they had the measure of the music and they remain the premiere spokesmen for its worth.

The Beethoven, Op. 59 No. 1, presented some of the same difficulties to performers and listeners of his time as the Carter does to ours. Beethoven played fast and loose with the traditional formal expectations of the Classical style from the start and in the second movement proceeded to subvert the very concept of theme in the opening motto-motif stated by the cello and defiantly reiterated throughout the section. All of this was cleanly and energetically presented by the Quartet, who inhabit this music with ease.

The Adagio also puts demands on performer and listener, being long and unrelentingly somber. It is also deeply moving. It was here that the Pacifica might have been less than ideal interpreters, coming up short on emotional intensity, though their strength and command of the formal structure was unquestionable.

They put the cap on the proceedings in their rollicking take on the folkish finale, and the bravura concluding gesture brought a rapturous response from the audience.