



Chamber Music Festival opens with a wallop

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By Lev Bratishenko

The Montreal Chamber Music Festival has come a long way from a few mountaintop concerts. Today, it has its 20th anniversary season introduced by the lieutenant-governor with a bewildered conscript rigid at his side. Now that's a local institution.

I don't know about the rest of the audience, but we were there to hear the Dover Quartet. These young musicians play with remarkable attentiveness and an astonishingly even tone, as if they were four limbs of one instrument; they also have the rarity of a strong and distinctive viola. It's hard to think of a better group for Viktor Ullmann's transporting String Quartet No. 3.

Ullmann was a student of Schönberg, though you would hardly know it from this piece, which is representative of his later style. It was written in 1943 in Theresienstadt, a walled city (now in the Czech Republic) that the Nazis turned into a special concentration camp with a cultural scene so that the Red Cross could visit and contradict the strangely persistent rumours of death camps. Prisoners included conductor Rafael Schächter, pianist Alice Herz-Sommer, Ullman, and many visual artists: a survey of European high culture. Ullman was killed in 1944, but you can find several albums that include some of the works he composed in Theresienstadt.

The quartet opens deceptively, a simple and unnerving melody that hides the sardonic energy to come. It made me think of children playing among fresh corpses. The Dover were magnificently crisp in the second movement. Then the first theme returns to reset our ears before a haunting melody that's slowly introduced by the viola, which sounded hoarse in a perfect way, like a tuberculous cough that can't be stifled and spreads...

I wish the festival many more anniversaries but fewer concerts like this one.