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November 22, 1999

Section: Community

Review: Chicago String Quartet gives a brilliant performance Saturday night

The Chicago String Quartet

Saturday, Oak Ridge Associated Universities' Pollard Auditorium

The Oak Ridge Civic Music Association presented the Chicago String Quartet in a brilliantly performed concert given before a large audience at the Pollard Auditorium on Saturday evening.

The Chicago String Quartet, founded in the fall of 1995, is the resident string quartet of the Chicago Chamber Musicians, and is in residence at the DePaul University School of Music, where members Joseph Genualdi and Stefan Hersh, violins, Rami Solomonow, viola, and Christopher Costanza, cello, are on the full-time faculty.

First on the program was the String Quartet in F Major, Op. 14, No. 1, by Ludwig van Beethoven. Pianists who know the Beethoven piano sonatas will be puzzled by this opus number, because it is the same as for the Piano Sonata No. 9 in E Major.

Beethoven arranged this sonata for strings in response to requests that his more popular piano sonatas be made available to a wider audience. He obviously disliked the idea, for the Opus 14 is the only piano sonata he transcribed for strings.

It is interesting to compare the two versions. The version for strings allows for a greater range of expressiveness and subtletness of nuance than is possible with the piano. On the other hand, the piano, a percussion instrument, adds its unique dynamic qualities to the piano version.

The Chicago String Quartet gave a beautifully controlled performance of the entire Opus 14, exhibiting their deep understanding of the score with nearly flawless technique, beautiful phrasing and exceptional control of dynamics.

If any fault can be found, it lies in the opening measures of the first movement where a rapid and difficult musical figure in 16th notes is played in turn by each of the four instruments. In each case the execution of the phrase was fuzzy.

The centerpiece of the evening's concert was the String Quartet No. 9, "Brief Encounters," by George Perle. Commissioned for the Chicago String Quartet, it was given its premiere performance in May of this year. Saturday evening's presentation was the fourth public performance of this work.

"Brief Encounters" is cast into three parts with Parts One and Three divided into five movements each, and Part Two into four. The various movements have a duration of 27 seconds for the shortest to 4 minutes and 45 seconds for the longest.

Perle, born in 1915, was among the first American composers to become involved in the music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. According to the program notes printed in the program booklet, "Perle modified his compositional approach to arrive at a 12-tone modality that led to a more concordant atonality." The program notes state further that "Perle's music is more connected to Berg and Bartok than to Schoenberg."

There appeared to be little in "Brief Encounters" that related to the magnificent and imaginative string quartets of Bartok. The first movement of Part One held promise for very interesting music to follow, but that promise failed to materialize.

The musical style of "Brief Encounters" was in vogue some 30 to 50 years ago, and it is a style that has alienated a large segment of the music-loving audience. Thankfully, many of today's younger and most gifted composers are writing new music in a neo-romantic style that offers memorable melodies, musical structure and originality.

Though the performance of "Brief Encounters" given by the Chicago String Quartet was absolutely first-rate, the music had little to offer in the way of lasting interest.

After the intermission, the audience was treated to a superb performance of the String Quartet in D, Op. 44, No. 1, by Felix Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn wrote some of his best music for the string quartet. His six principal quartets are probably the greatest

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contribution to this genre between the quartets of Beethoven and Bartok. Opus 44 consists of three quartets and though this one is numbered first, it was the last of the three to be completed.

The first and fourth movements are energetic and are almost orchestral in concept. The second movement, a menuetto, is quiet and relaxed. It is followed by the third movement with its calm and continuous flow.

The finale, a lively movement in sonata-rondo form, contains dance-like rhythms that echo the energetic drive of the first movement.

The Chicago String Quartet's brilliant performance of the Mendelssohn brought the audience to its feet in a standing ovation. Three curtain calls later, the musicians treated the audience to a beautiful performance of the second movement of the String Quartet by Claude Debussy, a fitting conclusion to the evening.

The concert goers who arrived early were entertained by a pre-concert program in the lobby given by the SpyreRidge String Quartet, a group of four Oak Ridge High School juniors. They have played together for some time now, and they have given many concerts professionally in the Oak Ridge area.

The very talented young musicians are: **Bryce Galen** and Katie Shaner, violins; Noah Bell, viola; and Andy Chang, cello. Their mini-concert concluded with a fine and spirited performance of the first movement of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" by Mozart.

It is gratifying to hear these fine young musicians who are a product of the widely recognized and extraordinary string program of the Oak Ridge school system.

George W. Bayley is a music critic for The Oak Ridger.

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