

Quartet shows poise, passion

Review by Kenneth DeLong for the Calgary Herald, October 25, 2011

Cecilia String Quartet played at the U of C's Rozsa Centre on Monday.

Presented by the Calgary ProMusica Society

It is now just over a year since the four still-young ladies that comprise the Cecilia String Quartet emerged victorious from the gruelling Banff International String Quartet Competition. It was a proud moment for classical music in Canada, especially since the second-place in the competition was also won by a Canadian quartet.

The past year has been a busy one for the quartet. Not only have they had a change in cellist, but they have continued to tour widely, all the while maintaining their duties as quartet-in-residence at The Glenn Gould School in Toronto. In the next little while, they will record four CDs for the Canadian Analecta label, discs that will include the music of Dvorak, whose music they played to win the competition.

The Calgary stop on the quartet's tour included the Canadian premiere of a recent work by the distinguished and prolific American composer Stacy Garrop. The contemporary world of composition is considerably more varied than a few years back. Gone are the days when a chord or (heaven forbid!) a melody were a sign of pandering to the much reviled middle class (that would be those buying the tickets). Garrop's new work clearly attempts to speak in a musically language that can be understood by an engaged audience. Directly pictorial in nature, it presents musical portraits of five illuminations of Cleves' Book of Hours, a series of pictures from a Medieval manuscript.

These musical pictures employ a musical style similar to Bartok, with forceful rhythms, high harmonics, short melodic fragments, and rapid and striking textural contrasts. If the musical style is (for contemporary music) fairly conventional, the results were nonetheless interesting and compelling.

The program opened with the third of Mozart's quartets dedicated to his colleague and friend, Joseph Haydn. These, as a group, are some of the most beautiful pieces ever written, as was evident in the silky, almost-rapturous performance the Mozart quartet received. The Cecilia ladies clearly have an affinity with this music, naturally express-

ing its blend of poise and passion.

It was fitting that Dvorak featured on the program, especially given the Cecilia Quartet's Banff success. This time it was Dvorak's final string quartet in G major, Op. 106, one of the composer's greatest chamber pieces. The quartet itself stands rather apart from some of Dvorak's works.

Although there is melody in abundance, it is rather the richness and complexity of the textures that impress.

Such music needs a first violinist with a "generous" sound, and this it had in the marvelous playing of Min-Jeong Koh. She, however, was well matched by her fellow players, and under their capable fingers the quartet soared and thrilled, filling the hall with the most exquisite sounds.

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