

ensemble

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CECILIA STRING QUARTET

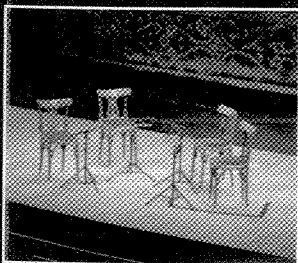
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PORTRAIT

Cecilia String Quartet

A Breath of Fresh Air from Canada

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by Anja Renczikowski

They could have simply chosen the name “Toronto String Quartet”, since the four women come from this region and met while studying in Toronto. The name “Cecilia String Quartet” – honouring the patron saint of music – appears almost antiquated. However, it shows more imagination than the common practice of pragmatically naming a group after one of its members or, well, a city. A blitheful trio is expecting me in a small hotel in Bonn, one of the stops on a major European tour. Violinist Min-Jeong Koh is missing. She is not feeling well and would like to rest a little before the show in the evening. That’s OK because the remaining three are all the more cheerful and good-humoured, and seem to be happy to talk about their first major tour after winning the competition in Banff. One thing is as clear as day: There is no single spokesperson in this group. The four of them are a team and rely on each other – on stage as well as in daily life. And currently, daily life is very strenuous. Nearly every day brings another concert in another town. For more than a month, they have been crisscrossing Europe and giving concerts in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany. It’s a massive program that the musicians visibly enjoy.

With very few exceptions such as the *Vertavo Quartet*, female quartet formations are rare. “Canada simply has wonderful female quartet players,” violinist Sarah Nematallah jokes, and her colleagues laugh out loud. “No – seriously it just turned out this way,” viola player Caitlin Boyle adds. So, there was no plan after all, but from an early age, the four instrumentalists were all gearing towards a career as chamber musicians. “When I was 12 years old, I knew what I wanted to do,” says cellist Rachel Desoer. “I thought playing with others in a small circle was much more exciting than playing in a large orchestra.” Viola player Caitlin Boyle began visiting chamber music festivals when she was very young. “Finding the right people - musicians who really want to do this - is not easy. We were lucky, and our love for playing in a quartet brought us together.” Soon after its official inception in 2004, the quartet took master classes with renowned ensembles like the Juilliard, Emerson, Tokyo or Takacs quartets, respectively. Working with the St. Lawrence String Quartet generated special

momentum. As the first Canadian string quartet, this group won the Banff competition in 1992. But what is it like to collaborate with such renowned musicians? “It’s about everything as a whole, the character of the music, interpretation issues,” explains Caitlin Boyle. “And of course, detailed questions about the individual instruments are discussed with each respective teacher. It is always great to observe how others work together and how they come together as musicians.” Suggestions and advice continue to be important. After exhausting practice periods, the players are grateful if they receive some feedback from senior musicians every once in a while. “First we try out a lot of different things,” explains Sarah Nematallah. “Before we start discussing, we play a lot. The first and foremost method is listening,” Rachel Desoer adds. “We are trying to be independent and would like to trust our own ideas and to develop our own style. But when important musicians come to Toronto, we like to play for them and get some input. It is always good to hear other opinions.”

One of these opinions is supplied by Timothy Ying of the Ying-Quartet. He also calls Toronto home.

The International String Quartet

Competition in Banff is held only every three years. It is among the most important and most renowned events of this kind. For the Cecilia String Quartet, it was not the first competition they have won. They had already been crowned winners in Osaka, at the Rutenberg competition, and in Bordeaux. But placing first in Banff, 140 km west of Calgary, added the necessary momentum to their career. This is mainly because their win was tied to an extensive concert tour, which the four musicians used to gather experience on the international concert stage. But first of all, they were just simply happy about their success. *“There are so many unforeseeable elements,”* says Caitlin Boyle. *“It depends on who else is playing and on our form that day – and, of course, on the jury. You never know what to expect.”* And the competition was nothing to sneeze at, either. Among others, the following groups participated last year: The Swiss-German *Amaryllis Quartet*, the German *Asasello Quartet*, the *Artium String Quartet* from Russia, and *Quatuor Zaïde* from France, who won third prize. Sarah Nematallah points out one specific aspect. *“Of course, we had won some competitions before, but when we played the concert after the competition, it became clear to me what it truly meant for a Canadian quartet to win in Canada. It was a home game for us. We’re only the second Canadian quartet to win this competition. We felt so very honoured.”* Without a trace of envy, the violinist adds, *“Not only did WE win, but the Canadian Afiara String Quartet was very successful as well, because they placed second. Therefore, we could show how active the chamber music scene is in Canada and that we have truly excellent ensembles.”* One may try to imagine what happened behind the scenes, because violinist Min-Jeong Koh is married to one of the members of the *Afiara Quartet*. The

likeability radiated by the musicians is mainly based on their self-confidence, which is nonetheless free of competitiveness or envy, and on their infectious conviviality.

They simply seem to enjoy what they are doing. After the tour, which is currently continuing in Canada and the USA, the ensemble will publish its debut CD of Dvořák string quartets under the Canadian Analekta label. They are planning a total of four recordings, including music by Alban Berg - his ‘Lyric Suite’ - and Janacek’s first string quartet, based on Tolstoy’s Kreutzer Sonata.

Immediately after the competition success in Banff, cellist Rebecca Wenham left the quartet. That decision that was certainly not easy for the remaining members. Sarah Nematallah reports, *“Both of us, Rebecca and I, started the quartet in 2004. We worked together for more than six years. But sometimes life takes us in different directions. We were all in Toronto, and she had decided to stay in California. But she wanted us to participate in the competition in Banff. After all, we had been working towards this for such a long time. Something had developed, and she did not just want to destroy it. Therefore she continued with us through the competition.”* The members regrouped quickly and invited Rachel Desoer to join the team. *“We are happy to have found Rachel. She’s fantastic. Of course, the events that led up to this were very sad, but now things have turned out well.”* But what is it like for the cello player to come into an ensemble that has grown slowly and steadily over the years? Rachel Desoer laughs and explains, *“They made it very easy for me. And they were very patient. Maybe it was also good that the other three had been working together for such a long time already, because there weren’t that many decisions left to make.”* Four women onstage, lots of practice time and traveling and being on the road together – it is hard to imagine that things are harmonious all the time. Do they sometimes fight on and off stage? *“If you need too*

much personal space, this definitely is not the right job for you,” says Sarah Nematallah. “We have fun together and spend much time together but sometimes we need to go our own way.” Caitlin Boyle adds, “We’re lucky in that we don’t just get along when it comes to music. But I think that music and personal life do not necessarily need to go together. I think we respect each other’s boundaries and look out for each other. Therefore, we feel fine and support each other. These conditions are also very conducive to making music.”

No question, the four musicians know what matters most. They know the reality of the music business and were by no means dew-eyed getting into their careers. The fact that they are on the road every day and have to adjust to new situations all the time is nothing new to them. They are looking back on many years, some of them full of privation. They only bought what they absolutely needed in order to live as thriftily as possible. No time-consuming second jobs were to disrupt their concentration. Music remained in the foreground. The musicians did not even have a car. Canada is an enormous country. It is difficult to imagine how one would deal with the long distances without a car. Obviously amused by the question, Caitlin Boyle confirms, *“No, none of us has a car!”* and they all love heartily. *“And anyway,”* Rachel Desoer adds, *“Canada has excellent train connections and is so large that we might as well just take the plane.”* However, life on the path towards a promising chamber music career was not easy. *“If you decide to become a professional chamber musician, you know that this is not necessarily a lucrative endeavour. If you pick this career and you think you will earn lots of money, you are wrong,”* says violinist Sarah Nematallah. *“We knew that, and we like it the way it is. We have lived very frugally. But it is not so difficult if you’re happy and you have a goal.”*

Decisions about new pieces for the

repertoire are made in democratic fashion. *“There’s a kind of backup list in our heads,”* says Caitlin Boyle. *“It contains all the pieces we like and that we might like to add to our repertoire at some point.”* When adding pieces, the four musicians make sure that they cover the broadest possible range and add contemporary pieces to the romantic ones and those from the classic period. First and foremost, they would like to discover contemporary composers from their home country and introduce them to the public at large. In the fall of 2011, they will present a new piece by composer Stacy Garrop and a new piece by Canadian Kelly-Marie Murphy. Their European tour program also included a piece by Serbian-Canadian composer Ana Sokolovic, entitled ‘Commedia dell’arte’. *“She was inspired by Italian renaissance theatre and introduces a variety of sounds. To make the sounds, we have to use our mouths or knock on our instruments.”* They have no reservations. If they are asked to integrate other art forms, they do so with enthusiasm. A little while ago, they participated in a multimedia project entitled “The Snow Queen”. It tells the story by Hans Christian Andersen, accompanied by the music of Canadian composer Patrick Cardy. Choreographer Alon Nashman actively involved the musicians. Dressed in wondrous white costumes, they were also called upon to act. *“That was a great experience,”* recalls Caitlin Boyle. *“We were able to view each other from a completely different perspective. Integrating a visual aspect can be very exciting.”* Sarah Nematallah concludes, *“Exactly this is the difference between a CD and a live concert. Everything that happens on the stage, whether acting, singing or music, touches the audience directly and triggers immediate reactions. And all of this stimulates new experiences.”*