

Concert review: Chiara String Quartet, *Bartók by Heart*, 8/31/16

The Chiara String Quartet presented an audacious and revolutionary program over two days at National Sawdust in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

The project was nothing less than performing all six of Béla Bartók's notoriously difficult quartets over the course of two performances, all played by memory. It sounds at first like a fool's errand, or a four-way musical suicide attempt. But the Chiara not only rose to the technical challenge and passed with flying colors – they presented easily the most convincing Bartók this correspondent has ever heard.

As cellist Gregory Beaver explained to the audience in a casual and engaging introduction, Bartók's work as a composer was heavily influenced by his work as an ethnomusicologist. He spent many years travelling throughout Europe and North Africa with an early-generation wax-cylinder recording machine in hand, observing and cataloging the folk music of many peoples and cultures. Beaver even presented, by way of his iPhone and an MP3 file, one of Bartók's original field recordings, that of an Arabic folk song collected in North Africa, from roughly the period of the composition of the 2nd and 4th string quartets.

Due to complicated mitigating circumstances, our correspondent heard only these two quartets, the 2nd and 4th, out of the two performances. They were more than sufficient to form an extremely positive opinion and come away very impressed.

From the first measures of the 2nd Quartet, the performance was revelatory. There was a lushness and lyricism to it that I had never actually heard before, and got me thinking of Ravel and perhaps Janacek. It placed Bartok firmly in his place among the early-modern impressionists and neo-romantics, far away from the calculating experimentalists and mathematical theorists of the German and Second Viennese schools of the same era.

As anyone who has tried to play Bartók knows, his rhythms are often extremely complex, notated with a precision that necessitates subdivision in 32nd-notes and endless clapping-and-singing exercises to understand the interlocking of parts and interplay of rhythmic motifs. It becomes almost a mathematical endeavor.

Or does it? As anyone who plays folk music knows, notating it accurately (particularly vocal lines) in Western notation is very difficult. Classical notation can only go so far in recording and transmitting the particular cadence and inflection of a melody (even a rhythm in some cases), just as typed words on a page can only approximate the tone and color of a regional dialect – not to mention the tone of voice, character and emotion with which it is expressed.

In liberating themselves from the printed sheet music, the Chiara Quartet have rediscovered the point of Bartok's notation: it's not meant to be played with mathematical, clockwork precision – it's a valiant attempt at notating improvised, vocal lines of folk music. The difference between this performance and almost every other "authoritative" version that came previously was apparent throughout the evening but most impressive in the cello solo of the third movement of the 4th Quartet. Often times one can almost hear the cellist counting in his head, the complex overlaps between his or her melodic line and the accompaniment in the other three voices are obvious in that complexity, here it unfolded with the perfect improvisatory character. In general, these complex works became simple, their strident and dissonant harmonies became exuberant and colorful, their difficulty became ease. The Chiara Quartet rediscovered and realized the intentions of Bartok - and would not have sounded remotely out of place on an open-air stage at a Mediterranean folk festival, surrounded by dancers and tambourines.

The group's stage presence was immensely appealing, as they were intensely focused but never seemed to take themselves too seriously. They smiled at each other and occasionally fought back giggles at some of the wittier passages in the fast movements of the fourth quartet. Greg Beaver's introductions to the concerts were personable, informal and engaging. And just before the beginning of the second piece on the program, when an elderly gentleman in the audience demanded that they replace the cellist's chair because it had been squeaking, they reacted with unfazed aplomb - replacing the chair and then introducing the next work as "Bartok's Fourth Quartet, with only the squeaking that he intended." The audience laughed appreciatively.

The National Sawdust was an excellent venue for this performance. Originally an actual sawdust factory, then a warehouse, it has now been expertly converted into a performance space suitable for everything from classical chamber music to rock and jazz to readings and lectures. The main hall is equipped with excellent acoustic paneling in an appealingly modern black and white design, and includes two levels of seating. A bar just outside the main hall adds to the festive and club-like atmosphere - even if paying seven dollars for a mediocre IPA in a can, as our thirsty and jet-lagged correspondent did, is a bit excessively Brooklynesque.

Final verdict: Revelatory, revolutionary and immensely enjoyable. Six stars out of five (what, you think Bartok limited himself to Euclidean math?) and highly recommended at all costs.

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