

CONCERT REVIEW

Minetti Quartet show Viennese Character

3/31/2016

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The Minetti Quartet of Vienna presented a program of Schubert, Kurtag and Beethoven at the Rubinstein Atrium at Lincoln Center on Thursday night.

If the Minetti Quartet's style were embodied in a single character, it would be that of a well-adjusted Type A personality. Fast-paced, excitable, full of energy and ideas, but sensible and grounded enough to never descend into brittle tension or strained neuroticism. Often caffeinated, but responsibly so on high-quality richly flavored espresso. At times in quite a hurry, but with enough presence of mind to never be in a panicked rush.

From the first few passages of the program, in Schubert's "Quartettsatz", their particular intensity and energy was clearly apparent. They are ideally suited to this late Schubert work, which buzzes with a barely-contained nervous vitality. The emotional effect of the performance was one of both a boundless enthusiasm for life and a desperation to assert oneself and hold onto existence at all costs – a common theme in late Schubert, realized fully and then resolved in the "Death and the Maiden" quartet from the same time period, and all too understandable when one considers that, when we talk about "late" Schubert, we are referring to a man 30 years of age. The Minetti's performance of this stand-alone quartet movement was taken at a quick tempo, full of energy and virtuosity but always with a clean elegance to the sound, and their changes of color and sonority were smooth and in good taste.

The stage presence of the ensemble is appealing but not remarkable. The cellist is the most visually expressive of the four, perhaps not coincidentally he is also the one to address the audience during the performance, introducing the works and talking a bit about the quartet's approach to them. He seems to be the anchor of the group while they play, always either keeping his eyes on the other three musicians or letting his expressive face react to the ebb and flow of the music. The first violinist is energetic, virtuosic and exquisitely tasteful, despite a few very minor slips in intonation and tone towards the beginning of the concert. She seems, however, absorbed in her own part to the point of being detached from the ensemble – at times the effect is almost an old-style "first violinist and three colleagues" setup, though this may have been due to the predominance of early-Romantic quartets on the program. The two inner voices, second violinist and viola, are again technically flawless and very tasteful, but appear very much the "secondary" or subordinate voices in the ensemble.

The second work on the program was Kurtag's "Officium Breve In Memoriam Endre Szervanszky." Composed in 1989, this peculiar work consists of 15 short movements and

lasts just over 12 minutes. It is dedicated to, and quotes, Kurtag's late composer friend Szervanszky, but compositionally owes far more to Anton Webern – at times I had to remind myself I wasn't listening to Webern's "Bagatelles." It is an odd work, spare and minimalist in Kurtag's most archly intellectual style, alternating between barely-audible bleak ruminations and noisy outbursts of bad temper. A chorale towards the end adds some level of emotional depth but the overall effect is one of alienation. An interesting but not easily accessible work – and one that demands an excellent performance space. Unfortunately the Rubinstein Atrium was not that venue: the somewhat dry acoustics didn't help, but the real villain was the air-conditioning unit whirring away in the rafters. It was barely noticeable during the more familiar repertoire, but for a piece of such spare minimalism as the Kurtag, it came close to ruining the experience.

The Minetti returned to the standard canon with Beethoven's first string quartet, Op. 18 no. 1. Again they took quick and lively tempos, played with sparkle and sanguine cheer and impeccable technique. Their Viennese character is clearly apparent in this repertoire – elegant, sophisticated, lovers of life and experts at good humor and a good time – and, perhaps, a bit superficial.

The second movement of 18/1, as mentioned by the cellist in his introductory remarks, was inspired by Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." Beethoven intended to convey a deep sense of tragedy and pathos with this movement, and in the Minetti's performance the most that came across was a restrained melancholy. What a bother, to be sad for a while before we get to the third movement and can play scherzos and champagne bubbles and have a good time again! And the third and fourth movements were a delight. But the overall effect, in the end, left me wanting more emotional range and depth from the ensemble.

To return to our personification of the Minetti style, the well-adjusted Type A personality, she is indeed bright and clever and full of life and an immense pleasure to spend time with. But she's not the person you turn to in your low moments, she's not the one you ask for an opinion on Rilke or Dante, if you come to her seeking understanding on a particularly long dark night of the soul, she's going to pop some bubbly and put on some dance music and eagerly exhort you to just cheer up. You find yourself wishing she would slow down a bit sometimes, and as much as she's a dear friend you get a little exhausted by her sometimes, and end up feeling alienated, melancholy and misunderstood like a Kafka antihero – in itself, the effect ends up being very Viennese in a different way.

For an encore, the Minetti chose the "Canzonetta" movement from a Mendelssohn quartet. This turned out to be a lively, folkloric song interspersed with a beautiful vintage Mendelssohn scherzo. It was played flawlessly, with impeccable taste and warmth and sweetness and the exact balance of lightness and spark that Mendelssohn requires. It may have been, with no exaggeration, one of the best performances of Mendelssohn I've ever heard.

But coming on the heels of 18/1 and the Quartettsatz, the choice of repertoire almost annoyed me. Open another bottle of champagne, put on another sequined dress and let's keep partying!

I left the concert in a curious state of unease, delighted by the beautiful and masterful music-making I had just heard and exhausted by the relentless liveliness, wondering what on earth was wrong with me that I can't seem to stomach excessive amounts of sanguine humor, stalked by the darker ghosts of Mitteleuropean psyches, in search of a good beer and some Kafka.

FINAL VERDICT: four of five stars. Highly recommended and enjoyable, but not without flaws. Impeccable technique and excellent taste, lively and exuberant character, but one ends up wishing for greater emotional range and depth.

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