

Verona Quartet at Carnegie Hall
2/7/2017

The Verona Quartet, recent winners of the Concert Artists Guild quartet competition and current Graduate Resident String Quartet at Juilliard, presented a fine program at Weill Recital Hall on Tuesday night, demonstrating impeccable skill and training, good taste, and most importantly, a willingness to engage with the new.

The program opened with a repertoire staple, Ravel's Quartet in F major, written early in the composer's career in 1902-03. The work's delicate balance between impressionist modernism and classical restraint often makes it a favorite of young quartets seeking to display their unity and taste as an ensemble, and the Verona proved themselves absolutely up to its challenges. They play with a rich, dark-hued sound (the second violin often sounds like a second viola, a positive quality in this reviewer's opinion), natural and well-timed rubato, and an organic sense of ensemble. It was a dignified and engaging performance, though I eventually found myself wishing for a just slightly broader range of colors and expressions.

It's extremely difficult to fairly evaluate musical ensembles at the highest levels of the professional performing world, because when everyone has world-class training and flawless technique, barring any rare spectacular lapses of taste or concentration, it's difficult to find anything to complain about and one feels like bit of a jerk upon doing so. The problem for artists is simply: when everyone on a scale of one to ten is a ten, you must go to eleven.

The Verona's Ravel was a solid, impressive, respectable, enjoyable ten out of ten. I wanted eleven. I wanted to hear the piece's shimmery colors and sudden neurotic changes of mood exaggerated, indulged, played with, experimented with. I wanted to hear the four marvelous instrumentalists of the quartet test their own limits and upend the expectations of an audience that has probably heard this piece five times already this season.

Maybe I'm being unfair. If one were to make an analogy between the music world and the world of letters, the classical performer is more akin to an academic than a novelist - in that the early part of her career depends on earning the approval and support of professors, field experts and benefactors, and only later the public. A pop songwriter uploading tracks to social media or a novelist self-publishing on Amazon can catch public attention directly, bypassing the middleman and beginning immediately with the construction of a relationship with their audience, the real purpose of art. The academic on the other hand writes for other academics, passing her thesis defense and publishing in her field's journals upon receiving the stamp of approval of her professors and peers, and only later will she build on her insular scholarly research to publish a book - even a masterpiece - accessible to the layman. And the classical musician, both by the nature of the specialized training genuinely required to master the difficulties of the genre and by the constructed form of the established system, must follow a similar path. The Verona Quartet were presented by a guild of agents and presenters as winners of a competition, judged by fellow professionals, experts and benefactors, and have built their successful early career as winners of other competitions.

It is to their credit that even in the rarefied air of Weill Hall, surrounded by their professors, benefactors and classmates, the Verona Quartet chose to present a world premiere. Composer Michael Gilbertson (b. 1987), a friend of the quartet, dedicated his first string quartet in two movements (completed just a month ago) to them, and was present at Carnegie for the premiere.

The composer was invited onstage by violist Abby Rojansky, who appears to be the group's official spokeswoman as she several times addressed the audience with contagious warmth and openness. Gilbertson too had an appealing manner about him, personable and mildly self-deprecating as he explained that the American presidential election had influenced the composition of his new quartet. "I had planned and started sketching a very different piece," he said, "but started over in mid-November after having a hard time continuing with my original ideas...I felt the need to write something comforting, and thought of the pulsing chords that open Sibelius' Second Symphony. A similar gesture of lulling, repeated chords became the basis for material in the first movement."

The opening figure, while clearly inspired by that Sibelius opening, struck me more as akin to Arvo Pärt or György Kurtág, silvery-blue and shimmering. The incessant but gentle asymmetrical rhythms were equal parts lullaby and dance. As the movement developed, its harmonic and textural world revealed itself to be very similar to Ravel, making it an interesting pairing for the first half of the program. There were also what I heard as allusions to Ligeti, in some passages of a cheerfully "mechanical" nature, evoking clockwork and automation, complete with understated yet comical instances of machinery winding down. The first movement had a satisfying symmetrical form. The second movement was a good-natured piece of abstract sound art based on the syncopated improvisatory rhythms of 20th century American popular music, in diatonic modes but with frequent non-functional harmonies, creating bold strokes of color and texture that were brought to vivid life by the Verona Quartet.

It was a familiar sound world but an unfamiliar location on the map, completely new, presented on its own terms.

After intermission, it almost felt like a chore to return to the standard conservatory repertoire with Beethoven's second "Razumovsky" quartet. Of course, everything Beethoven ever wrote is a timeless masterwork. But must every season in every concert hall always return to this rote recitation of the canon?

My complaint is not with the Verona Quartet. They are doing what the establishment requires them to do, demonstrating their credentials and proving their skill. Their performance of the quartet was excellent, displaying as in the Ravel a rich tone and strong ensemble, good taste and a dignified, appealing stage presence. But as in the Ravel, somewhere during the second movement my thoughts turned to grumpy meditations on the restriction of the Standard Repertoire and the artificiality of the modern conservatory-trained artist's path.

The quartets of Beethoven are over two hundred years old. Generations upon generations of string players have studied and performed them, and the number of flawless recordings of the entire set currently available could fill an entire shelf at the Strand. At a certain point my question becomes - why? Why am I spending my evening listening to this same piece, *again*? And what is my job as a critic now, to sharpen my ears and narrow my eyes and hope the cellist misses a high note so I can have something concrete to write about? Again, the Verona's performance was an excellent, competition-winning, perfect ten out of ten, and I was left wishing for eleven. Eleven is, I would argue, necessary if one intends to perform a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old work, otherwise

there is no compelling reason to perform it at all – for the public, that is. And there comes a time in every young artist’s life where she may finally stop considering what the professor and his checklist say, and concern herself with what she wants to say to her audience and what the audience needs from her. The Verona Quartet, as demonstrated by their boldness in opting for a world premiere (and doing the fascinating new work justice), are at that point. Now they must simply do it.

Final verdict: Strongly recommended for Chamber Music Tulsa, provided they are encouraged as much as possible to present new music and continue their collaborations with living composers. Consider them for several years down the line and ask them for an all-living composers program.

Their bio in Tuesday night’s program also emphasizes their dedication to teaching and outreach.

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