

Review: Ariel Quartet brings youthful energy, sense of discovery to classical works at Kravis

By GREG STEPANICH , Tuesday, March 13, 2012

One of the best things about seeing younger people take over the classical heritage as their own is the fresh approach and raw energy they bring to the task.

That's not to say that older musicians are set in their ways and resistant to change. It's simply to say that when a foursome of twentysomethings takes on thrice-familiar music, they can bring a sense of commitment and discovery to the works that renews and invigorates them.

The Ariel Quartet, which is just such an ensemble, was founded in Israel when its initial members were in their teens (violinist Jan Gruening, who hails from Germany, is a newcomer). It was installed as quartet in residence at the University of Cincinnati-College Conservatory of Music in January, and appeared Monday night on the Young Artists series at the Kravis Center's Rinker Playhouse.

The quartet (which also includes violinists Alexandra Kazovsky and Gershon Gerchikov, and cellist Amit Even-Tov) began with the first of Leos Janacek's two quartets, subtitled Kreutzer Sonata after the short story by Tolstoy. Janacek's music, a quirky mix of Romanticism and forward-looking innovation, is entirely original, and this quartet from 1923 alternates mournful melodies and harmonies with shattering outbursts that break the mood and suggest imminent violence.

This is a group that has excellent ensemble and first-rate communication among its members, and each movement of the Janacek was precisely and expertly played. The first rapid theme after the opening bars was played by Even-Tov about as fast as it could be, right in keeping with the composer's intention, and Kazovsky and Gerchikov soon followed suit. It's a nerve-wracking effect, and immediately turns the piece into a drama, not just four movements of music.

The level of technical command of each of the four players was impeccable, and their attention to dynamics scrupulous. This Janacek was a series of tableaux, separated by profound silences; the outbursts such as the ponticello eruptions on violin and viola in the third movement were brilliantly done. One slight caveat: The hugeness of the contrast between the tortured, yearning slow music and those explosions throughout the piece was almost too much; the work is every bit as effective with a little more subtlety and attention to its overall unity.

Gerchikov and Kazovsky switched seats for the next work, the String Quartet No. 6 (in B-flat, Op. 18, No. 6) of Beethoven, which as Gerchikov pointed out in remarks to the small house at the Rinker, has a remarkable finale that might actually be program music describing a manic-depressive state. In the Beethoven, the group's cohesion could clearly be heard, and the first movement came off with a lighthearted athleticism that was very attractive.

In the mysterious second theme of the otherwise serene second movement, the Ariels again maximized the drama, bringing out its snaky, dark lines with hushed intensity. The Scherzo dug firmly into the off-kilter rhythmic shocks Beethoven demanded, and in the trio section, Gerchikov tossed off his descending phrase with admirable grace. The celebrated La Malinconia introduction to the finale had the same forcefulness and strangeness as the Janacek, and the following main section came in like cool water after too much sun, with a coda played at breakneck, accurate speed.

The second half was devoted to one of the most familiar and beloved of all quartets, the Quartet No. 14 (in D minor, D. 810) of Franz Schubert, known as Death and the Maiden because of the song by that name from which Schubert borrowed his own material. This was a totally

engaged, powerful performance of this music, with the Ariels seemingly treating it as though it only recently been composed.

Among the high points were Even-Tov's gorgeous tone in the second variation of the slow movement, and the beautiful togetherness with which all four musicians played the movement's

theme. The finale was taken at a very brisk pace, building steadily and surely to a pitch of great excitement at the end that had the audience shouting its approval. Death and the Maiden is a long piece, but the Ariel Quartet made every bar of it interesting, playing with depth, passion and mastery.