

Lucid Culture

GREAT MUSIC THAT'S NOT TRENDY

Posted May 2, 2012

Old Ideas, New Insight from the American String Quartet

At the American String Quartet's concert last night at Merkin Hall, a small handful of Bach practice pieces threatened to upstage a late Beethoven quartet and then Bartok's immortal String Quartet No. 6. That at first might seem like a sure sign of trouble, but let's let violist Daniel Avshalomov explain. From his program notes: "Despite the luxury of our repertory, if we don't borrow Bach we never get to play it – not to mention that the composer himself constantly rearranged music of his own and of others." Avshalomov was referring to his arrangement of three preludes and fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which the ensemble played with flair, unselfconscious intensity and extraordinarily fresh insight. Avshalomov was right on the money by making the case for those works as being ideal for string quartet. Today, most of us who know these pieces think of them as organ works. However, Bach probably didn't write them for the organ: instead, it's more likely that he intended them for the harpsichord, since most of the organs of his era were already tuned to something different than even intonation, i.e. the modern piano scale that Bach championed, to which a harpsichord can be tuned – or not. Yet a harpsichord can't sustain the pieces' longest notes. Not only does a string quartet have what's essentially infinite sustain: a string arrangement allows for subtleties of attack and timbre that a harpsichordist or organist can only dream of.

So with a not-so-simple shift from single instrument to quartet, these pieces took on a whole new life. The Prelude and Fugue for 4 Voices in F (BWV 857) suddenly had unanticipated, dancing liveliness...and stark grandeur from cellist Wolfram Koessel, as he carried what would be a pedal line in an organ arrangement. By contrast, the Prelude and Fugue for 5 Voices in B-flat Minor (BWV 867) had a plaintive Vivaldiesque gravitas; the Prelude and Fugue for 4 Voices in G Minor (BWV 885) offset jaunty precision with apprehensive call-and-response. Can someone please commission some more of these? Avant-garde ensembles jump through hoops with electronics and everything but the kitchen sink in an attempt to breathe new life into works like these, when in this case all it took was an ambitious violist and his like-minded compatriots to appropriate them and make them indelibly their own.

How did they do Beethoven's String Quartet in F, Op. 135? Briskly and confidently, yet with meticulous attention to dynamics. They've done this piece, and for that matter the whole Beethoven cycle, umpteen times, yet this performance was bright and crisp and obviously a labor of love. The lively pulse of the opening Allegretto reached a high point with the end of the scherzo that closes the second movement, vivid to the point where the entire audience got the joke. Conventional wisdom is that the chilling, anguished series of tritones and their permutations in the concluding movement are also a joke, albeit an inside one. An alternative viewpoint, reinforced by this performance, is that they're a cruel and possibly deathly irony: "Must we? Yes, we must." And things don't look good.

Things got even more bleak with the Bartok. It's a shattering piece of music, one of the darkest gems in the string quartet repertory; like the Beethoven, this group knows it well. Spine-tingling moments abounded: understated savagery when the sarcastic, somewhat OCD march theme of the second movement reappeared in the third, or its chilling minimalist modernism as violinists Peter Winograd and Laurie Carney played dissonant microtones off each other, Carney sometimes reaching for a pianissimo so ethereal it was almost inaudible. Koessel's matter-of-factness with the elegaic, closing pizzicato riff underscored its early WWII-angst with a quiet mournfulness that was impactful to the extreme. Fans of acclaimed ensembles like the American String Quartet tend to take them for granted. But we shouldn't: there were actually some empty seats in the hall last night.