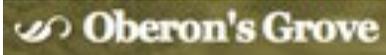




Zorá String Quartet



Zorá String Quartet @ Merkin Hall

By Philip Gardner | Oberon's Grove | January 18, 2017

Tuesday January 17th, 2017 - Young Concert Artists presenting the Zorá String Quartet at Merkin Hall, with music of Mozart, Webern, and Shostakovich on the bill. The prize-winning ensemble were making their New York debut this evening, and their musicality and passion were warmly hailed by a packed house. This was beautiful music-making, and their brief and poignant Bach encore was a perfect ending to a very impressively-played program.

Nothing quite sets a musical evening on its way like Mozart: in a lustrous performance of the string quartet #15 in D-major, K 421, we could savor the individual gifts of the four players as well as the polished blend they have developed; with particular warmth of tone from the lower voices cushioning the silken sheen of the two violins, the Zorá sound has a rich and instinctively integrated quality that constantly beckons the ear.

The Mozart 15th quartet has an intrinsically sad quality; it has sometimes been thought of as Mozart's reflection on the death of his mother. The opening movement veers from minor to major, with minor seeming to prevail; the heartfelt playing of the Zorá meant that these mood shifts were movingly defined. The third movement (Menuetto) features an elegant violin solo played serenely by Mr. Kowintaweewat over a plucked accompaniment. The concluding movement, a theme and variations setting, took on an added appeal thru the players' almost imperceptible hesitations, giving the music a lilting yet slightly restless quality. Ardent playing throughout was the hallmark of their performance.

Anton Webern wrote Langsamer Satz ('Slow Movement') in 1905 when he was 21 years old; it was inspired by a hiking excursion the young composer shared with his cousin (and - later - wife) Wihelmine Mörtl. In his diary, Webern wrote of their shared experience: "Our two souls were enraptured." Webern did not publish this work, considering it a student exercise. Its first known performance took place in 1962. Langsamer Satz was composed before Webern had fully embraced Schönberg's serialism, and thus it takes on the qualities of the late Romantic period, reminding us a bit of Wagner or Mahler.

The Zorá Quartet filled this music with a sense of longing; the ardor of the main theme is followed by a passionate descending motif and a piano repeat of the theme. After a brief pause, the four instruments sing forth fervently. Pablo Muñoz Salido's viola takes up another melody, against his colleagues' plucking accompaniment, before some sublime playing from Dechopol Kowintaweewat's violin leads us onto the work's gentle conclusion, played by the quartet with impressive control.

Following the interval, the Shostakovich 9th quartet showed us a different side of the Zorá's artistry: by turns edgy, turbulent, and ironic, this music brings out the dramatic aspects of the players, and it provided a setting for violinist Dechopol Kowintaweewat's impassioned playing.

The first movement opens with the Ms. Lee's violin playing a hypnotic oscillating motif over which Mr. Kowintaweewat plays a spectral dance before things settle into a rather anxious calm. Mr. Kowintaweewat veers from the plaintive to the sprightly, showing exceptional control of dynamics, and of mood. An off-kilter waltz and a peasant dance spring up, and - following what feels like a coda - there's a fugue leading to Ms. Ning's cello sounding over simmering accompaniment. The quartet then races on to a breathless, sudden end.

Called back by the enthusiastic applause of the Merkin Hall audience, the Zorá offered a truly lovely encore: a Bach chorale from the Saint Matthew Passion. In this brief work, the blend of voices that had delighted us all evening took on a benedictive quality.