



Zorá String Quartet

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How Should a Musician Make a Debut? Try Going Low-Key

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI | *The New York Times* | February 10, 2017

A lot was at stake for the pianist Dmitry Masleev when he made his New York recital debut on Jan. 30 at Carnegie Hall. After he took the gold medal in the 2015 International Tchaikovsky Competition, New Yorkers would have a chance to hear what the fuss was about.

His program, including works by Scarlatti, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff, seemed devised to showcase his spectacular virtuosity, especially the final work: Liszt's demonically difficult "Totentanz." And Mr. Masleev's white-hot performance — with arm-blurring bursts of octaves, tangles of chromatic passagework, pummeling iterations of a dirgelike "Dies Irae" motif — elicited a frenzied ovation. That was the way for a debut artist to make a lasting impact, right?

Not necessarily. Mr. Masleev, 28, is certainly an impressive pianist. Still, a couple of weeks earlier, on Jan. 17, I had heard a more modest New York debut that will stay with me longer, when the Zora String Quartet played at Merkin Concert Hall, presented by the invaluable organization Young Concert Artists. Naturally, the young members of this ensemble, who began playing together at Indiana University in 2013, wanted to demonstrate their technical skills. But they seemed even more intent on revealing depth and maturity.

They opened with Mozart's dark Quartet No. 15 in D minor (K. 421). From the first phrase of the opening movement, played with rich sound and wistful beauty, I knew this would be an eloquent and probing performance. They then turned to Webern's "Langsamer Satz," a work that shows its 21-year-old composer steeped in late Romanticism but anticipating Expressionist angst. The Zora played it with melting sound and affecting impetuosity. They ended with an intense performance of Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 9, completed in 1964, a fitful, brooding work. It was charming how these young musicians, from Thailand, South Korea, China and Spain, so strongly conveyed the very particular character of the hints of klezmer in the music.

The only missing element was a new or recent work. The Zora was introducing itself. What better occasion to introduce a piece?

The Verona Quartet, another outstanding ensemble of young musicians, did just that in a revealing New York debut on Tuesday at Weill Recital Hall. Presented by the Concert Artists Guild, the Verona opened with an exciting performance of Ravel's String Quartet in F, cohesive yet full of temperament, and ended with a vibrant, intelligent account of Beethoven's Quartet in E minor (Op. 59, No. 2).

At the center of the program was the premiere of a quartet by Michael Gilbertson. Mr. Gilbertson, 29, told the audience that he was working on the piece when the presidential election "hit" in November, as he put it. So he altered his original sketches to write something more introspective and comforting. The first movement, "Mother Chords," unfolds in gentle, pulsing waves of strange, soft, mystical harmonies. The second, "Simple Sugars," is full of frenetic blips, with the instruments often playing in-sync riffs and screeching sonorities.

Like the Zora program, this one seemed a clearer indicator of artistic potential than Mr. Masleev's recital, however staggering his technique. Listening to him made me think of a low-key New York debut, this one at the Mannes School of Music in 2011 by Daniil Trifonov, then fresh from his own victory in the Tchaikovsky Competition. He brought formidable virtuosity to Scriabin and Liszt. But I was more struck by his poetic accounts of Chopin, including the lovely Barcarolle.