Omer String Quartet Opens Moore County Arts Council's Series

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Southern Pines' charming and intimate Sunrise Theater was well filled with music lovers for the opening program of the 2018-19 Classical Concert Series. Now beginning its 27th season, it has been under the aegis of the Moore County Arts Council in recent years. The organizers are savvy about lining up some of the finest new ensembles at the start of their careers. This concert featured the Omer String Quartet.

The Omer Quartet won first prize at the 2017 Young Concert Artists International Auditions, and they have been appointed Ernest Stiefel Quartet-in-Residence at Caramoor. The Omer Quartet consists of violinists Mason Yu and Erica Tursi, violist Jinsun Hong, and cellist Alex Cox.

From the rich solo notes of Cox's fine cello that opened Haydn's Quartet in C, Op. 20, No. 2, the Omer's intonation was superb, as was their close matching of playing style. The violins of Yu and Tursi blended immaculately. Besides her fine playing, the distinct beauty of Hong's Amati viola reproduction was a constant pleasure: it projected into the hall ideally at all dynamics. The Omer's approach to Haydn is as fine as any top ensemble active now or in the recent past.

A long delay due to a broken cello string aside, the Omer brought similar mastery to the very different sound-world of Debussy's Quartet in G minor, Op. 10. Their control of dynamics and their meticulous care in recreating Debussy's kaleidoscopic range of instrumental color and timbre was excellent. In the slow movement, marginally more deliberate than usual, their expressive choices were convincing.

Violinist Tursi introduced the Haydn and Debussy. The long hiatus of the broken string was not wasted, as Yu, Tursi, and Hong answered audience questions about themselves, their instruments, and the quartet's founding. Tursi then went ahead and gave the information about the last two works on the program.

Quartet No. 1 (2009), by Chris Rogerson (b.1988), is in three movements ("Duel," "Hymn," and "Dance") and lasts about twelve minutes. The composer has racked up an impressive array of awards and commissions. Praised for the "virtuosic exuberance" of his music by *The New York Times*, he is on the roster of the Young Concert Artists. He has recently been composer-in-residence with the Amarillo Symphony, among others.

What a pleasure to hear an imaginative, tonal new work of some substance and length! The ensemble brought plenty of drama to the opening movement, a relentless driving rhythm with a brief, gentle drop in dynamic. The slow movement, "Hymn," might take on a life of its own, excerpted like the very different Adagio from Samuel Barber's First Quartet. A meditative, spiritual atmosphere is created by long, sustained harmonics from the cello and viola with prayerful commentaries or, in turn, songs from the first violin and others. Without pause, the tempo quickens for the finale. The Omer tossed about quick, repeated rhythmic patterns and floated a brief lyrical episode before ending with a dramatic flourish.

The *Große Fugue* in B-flat, Op. 133, by Ludwig van Beethoven is the craggy, monumental piece originally planned to be the final movement of his Quartet in B-flat, Op. 130. The Quartet reined back *fff*, applied *ppp* widely, and slowed tempi for an individual but very satisfying interpretation.