

TIME AND TRAVEL AT MAINLY MOZART

Frank Cooper

Yesterday's performance by the Amernet String Quartet displayed the timelessness of great music and the timefulness of one of our country's best youngish-professional ensembles. The scores by Haydn, Ullmann, and Beethoven allowed the rapt audience to listen to late-18th, early 19th, and early 20th century musical thought while the performers let us know that they had had only two hours of sleep after returning from their 17-concert tour in Israel.

Who would have known? No evidence of jetlag compromised any of the performances. In point of fact, the Amernet in its newest configuration – violinists Misha Vitenson and Tomas Cotik, violist Michael Klotz, and violoncellist Jason Calloway – played with evocative sense of style, masterful technique, penetrating insight, and, importantly, enhanced maturity. They act as one, the four individuals melding their tone into a single, coherent, richly communicative, lovely sound. While not new to the ensemble, the pervasive sum-total was newly evident.

Joseph Haydn's exquisitely wrought Quartet in C Major, Op. 76 no. 3, known familiarly as "Kaiser," transported everyone to the age when string quartets were, as never before, the enthusiastic pursuit of patrons, amateurs, and professionals, and when Haydn was at the peak of his form. Three of its movements were replete with what everyone expects of his era's most renowned composer – flawless form, engaging rhythms, tunes, and motives, unexpected key changes and odd moments of other surprise. Yet, for listeners in the early 21st century, particularly those who know about World War II, the slow movement, *Poco adagio: cantabile*, jolted their memories by its familiarity.

The background is fascinating: Haydn returned to Vienna from his triumphs in England much impressed by Thomas Arne's hymn, *God Save the King*. His friend, imperial librarian Baron Gottfried van Swieten, inspired the composer to write the equivalent to express Austria's "love for its sovereign." Thus, *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser* was born, Haydn's deeply personal musical statement, now arguably considered the finest of the world's many national anthems.

In his Quartet, Haydn states the stately theme then treats it to four variations, each featuring as soloist one of the performers. In yesterday's performance, each shone.

World War II was also brought to mind by the introduction of Viktor Ullmann's Third Quartet, known as Op. 46 and written at Theresienstadt a year or so before his deportation to Auschwitz where, in 1944, he was gassed to death. Remarkable for its passion, the score challenges its interpreters with demands for searingly meaningful expression. Its fugue's curious subject struck these ears with extraordinary poignancy. Overall, though, this is no heart-on-the-sleeve, sob-laden evocation of the Holocaust's tragedy but a life-affirming statement by a sincere, exceptionally gifted composer well deserving of a far more prominent place in the repertoire. The Amernet did the man and yesterday's audience the favor of a compelling performance.

Ludwig van Beethoven's Quartet in C minor, Op. 18 no. 4 brought the afternoon concert to a rousing conclusion without revealing fatigue on the performers' part, although they confessed afterward as adrenalin was wearing off to being tired. It was no easy toss-off, for Beethoven had taken Haydn's template for string quartets and enlarged upon it to his own, highly original ends. As a former pupil of the composer, young Beethoven (age 31 when they appeared in print) made his departures from the earlier norm with immense cleverness. Palatable radicalism, served in small doses, was key to his success with this and other works from around the same time: the First and Second Symphonies and the Third Piano Concerto.

With their status as Quartet-in-Residence at Florida International University, the Amernet Quartet has risen in esteem locally, and by well-heralded tours nationally and internationally, facts that should not be taken for granted. As their numerous appearances in the Mainly Mozart Festival have demonstrated ever so amply, they have earned their eminence.