Reviews

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CONCERTS

New York

The Signum Quartet: surprising in 140 notes or fewer

SIGNUM QUARTET, GILLES VONSATTEL (PIANO)
BARGEMUSIC 18 MARCH 2016

How can the Signum Quartet sound so cohesive, even with violinist Diana Tishchenko substituting for its usual player, Kerstin Dill, who recently gave birth? It is a tribute to the skill and empathy of today's musicians that with a little rehearsal – or perhaps a lot – they can drop into an established group with memorable results.

This was evident from the first bars of Beethoven's op.18 no.6, a vivacious opening, with the quartet impressive in the first movement's dotted rhythms. In the Adagio, the unison sequence emanated as if from a single instrument, and during the scherzo's rhythmic glee, I wrote in my notes: 'So much fun!'

Composed by Péter Louis Van Dijk (father of Xandi Van Dijk, the Signum's violist), *Iinyembezi* (2000–1) is a moving study based on John Dowland's *Flow my tears*. Using near-ideal harmonics and dynamic terracing, the quartet made a passionate case for a work that deserves much wider exposure.

As a surprise, the group added three 'quartweets' (a nod to Twitter) from a project it has developed with the Princeton Symphony Orchestra: composers were invited to submit 'works of 140 notes or fewer'. After a gentle Bach chorale excerpt, Caroline Shaw's lovely *Brev* displayed similar gravitas. But the most charming surprise came from nine-year-old Maako Fangajei: *The Race Car Dance* effectively replicated an engine revving up at the starting line and zooming off towards the horizon.

To close, the superb pianist Gilles Vonsattel joined the group for Brahms's Piano Quintet op.34, emphasising – magnificently – the craggier aspects of the landscape. I imagine that many in the packed audience, like me, were humming it on the way out.

BRUCE HODGES

FRANCESCA DEPASQUALE (VIOLIN) MENG-CHIEH LIU (PIANO)
NATIONAL SAWDUST 6 APRIL 2016

Given violinist Francesca dePasquale's distinguished lineage – her father, William, was a venerated presence among the first violins of the Philadelphia Orchestra and her mother, Gloria, is still one of its cellists – one might not be surprised to learn that

IRÈNE ZANDEL

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genetics has triumphed again. But biology doesn't fully explain dePasquale's admirable programming instincts, opening this recital (which launched her debut recording) with the challenging Chaconne from Bach's Second Partita. She was neither too flashy nor too fast, and her phrasing was immaculate and discreet, inviting the audience to contemplate the past in a cutting-edge, 21st-century room.

DePasquale plays her late father's violin (made in 1968 by Sergio Peresson), and it may be projecting to say that it has an 'old soul', but its sound lent richness and a serious air to Schumann's Intermezzo from the F–A–E Sonata and her brilliant finale, Bartók's Rhapsody no.1. Two high points came in the middle. The first was Messiaen's *Thème et variations*, given a heroic reading with delectable intonation. The second was Paola Prestini's virtuosic *Oceanic Fantasy* (violin and electronics), written for dePasquale. It has a striking ending that uses sounds of children talking and laughing, based on field recordings from southern Italy.

For both the album and this concert, dePasquale recruited the outstanding pianist Meng-Chieh Liu, who proved his mettle when the duo launched the moving encore, Korngold's own transcription of Marietta's Lied from his opera *Die tote Stadt*.

BRUCE HODGES

ARTEMIS QUARTET

ZANKEL HALL 17 APRIL 2016

This German group has been established for about 15 years. Its Zankel Hall concert displayed some notable virtues, chief among them the delicacy of the ensemble's execution – particularly impressive in this venue where strings can all too often sound harsh in fortissimo. The first of Mozart's 'Haydn' Quartets (in G major K387) had a sweetness of tone and a melting lyricism that were very appealing, although at times one wanted a more forthright sonority and an appreciation of the playfulness found in so much of the score. Too often, the result was staid, more of Berlin than of Vienna.

The highlight of the programme was the first of Janáček's two quartets, nicknamed the 'Kreutzer Sonata' after Tolstoy's novella. The quartet built the increasing dramatic tension expertly while producing a beautifully cultivated style, featuring keen accuracy of intonation at all dynamic levels. The febrile atmosphere was conveyed without a misstep.

After the interval was Grieg's Quartet in G minor op.27. For some reason, it gave the players trouble. It is an episodic work that exposes Grieg's limited mastery of large forms. One is inclined to forgive the composer for this on account of a flood of gorgeous melody; however, the players seemed intent on exposing the formal seams. The work also managed to upset their poised playing, which sometimes grew rougher in tone, with episodes of imperfect ensemble.

DENNIS ROONEY

TAKÁCS QUARTET, GARRICK OHLSSON (PIANO)

ZANKEL HALL 19 APRIL 2016

The players of the Takács Quartet, established in 1975, are seasoned veterans and their cultivated tone and interpretative eloquence prove it. Like the Artemis Quartet at the same venue (see above), the Takács used a wide dynamic range in this subterranean auditorium, where strings, when forced, can grow edgy. Not here. Hushed passages and details were articulated with such focus that the ear needed no encouragement to attend keenly. Louder pages were satisfactorily full in tone without exceeding a pleasing tonal blend.

CHRIS SMITH

Webern's *Langsamer Satz* closed the programme's first half. As we walked out to the lobby, I heard one audience member say to his neighbour: 'Who'd have known that Webern could write movie music?' The performance was ardent, with full value given to the youthful composer's lush *fin de siècle* harmonies. Beethoven's 'Rasumovsky' op.59 no.2 in E minor was the well-received opener. For some who prefer their Beethoven with sharper edges and more explosive accents, the Takács might have seemed too mellifluous; but the mixture of lyricism and formal understanding, aided by sophisticated dynamics, lent a satisfying air of authority and tonal suavity.

In Elgar's 1918 Piano Quintet, Garrick Ohlsson's attention to matching the dynamics of his colleagues resulted in a completely satisfying account of a work that has in the near-century since its premiere seemed to gain in significance. Performed with the clarity and expressiveness of these players, its often quasi-orchestral sonorities were heard at their best and placed the work squarely in the company of similar works by Brahms and Schumann.

DENNIS ROONEY