

CLASSICAL NOTES

The Boston Globe

Cycling through town with Beethoven

By David Weininger, Globe Correspondent | February 12, 2010

If you're a fan of the Beethoven string quartets, your cup is currently running over. Whether by coincidence or a fortuitous alignment of the stars, Boston is in the midst of two overlapping presentations of the complete Beethoven quartets, with a third fast on the horizon.

The Chiara Quartet, in residence at Harvard University, gives the second concert of its Beethoven cycle tonight, while the Muir String Quartet, at Boston University, presents the fifth entry in its cycle on March 3. In April, another Boston foursome - the Borromeo String Quartet - will begin its own cycle at the Gardner Museum. Add to these a visit by the excellent Berlin-based Artemis Quartet with an all-Beethoven program on March 5.

The first complete presentation of Beethoven's quartets took place in 1845, less than two decades after the composer's death. But at some point during the 20th century it became a musical sacrament: a rite of passage for any quartet wishing to stake its claim in the music world.

"The Beethoven quartets have always been the Mount Everest of every quartet career," says cellist Paul Katz, "and that's the way we prove ourselves. It's like the biggest mountain we can climb."

Beethoven's 16 string quartets - 17 if you count the "Grosse Fuge" - constitute arguably the richest and most varied body of chamber music to flow from a single composer's pen. An ensemble can present the quartets in chronological order, illustrating Beethoven's development in a single great arc, or by constructing each program from his early, middle, and late phases, presenting that evolution in miniature at each concert. Katz is a knowing guide to this territory. He was a founding member of the Cleveland Quartet, which played almost 30 Beethoven cycles during its 26-year career. Katz recalls in particular the 1988-89 season, in which the Cleveland played the Beethoven cycle in 10 different cities, including New York, Paris, London, and Washington. "We were all over the place [that] season. And it became sort of our thing."

The Cleveland's Beethoven immersion began in 1955 at the University at Buffalo, which presents a six-concert cycle of the Beethoven quartets every year. The unusual arrangement came about thanks to a bequest from a corporate lawyer named Frederick Slee. (His will even specified the order in which the quartets were to be performed.) Many great quartets - including the Budapest, Guarneri, and Emerson - have played part or all of a cycle there.

The Cleveland Quartet shared a Slee Beethoven cycle with the Guarneri in 1971; by 1973 they were playing all six concerts themselves. It was only their fourth season together. That contradicted a sort of unwritten maxim: A Beethoven cycle is something for older, experienced ensembles, not young guns. The presumption that young musicians aren't ready to scale Everest has mostly to do with the late quartets, inward-facing works that are almost as difficult to understand as to play - the kind of music for which a performer needs not only chops but wisdom and life experience.

But Katz, who now helms the Professional String Quartet Training Program at New England Conservatory, doesn't buy what he calls "a sort of misplaced sense of reverence" that holds these works off limits for young players. He remembers playing Beethoven's A-minor Quartet, Opus 132, in Munich when he and his fellow Clevelanders were in their 30s and reading a review that said that they were too young to play late Beethoven. "I think that's a snobbish assumption that doesn't necessarily hold water."

Quartets are accomplishing more earlier in their life cycles, he explains, a consequence of a general rise in playing standards. He teaches a seminar at NEC on the Beethoven quartets and regularly introduces students to the late quartets if he feels they're technically ready.

"I think it's a tremendous growth experience," he says. "I love to sort of take a young person in their 20s and make them consider the profundity and the emotional depth of this kind of music."

One thing that's probably universal, regardless of age, is the feeling the musicians have on finishing the cycle, bringing that epic journey to a close. "Oh, it's unbelievable," Katz remembers. "Every single time we did it, it was thrilling. It never got easy. It always felt just wonderful to have another notch on the belt."

Chiara Quartet: tonight at Harvard University; www.chiaraquartet.com

Muir String Quartet: March 3 at Boston University; www.muirstringquartet.org

Artemis Quartet: March 5 at Jordan Hall; www.celebrityseries.org

Borromeo String Quartet: April 4 at the Gardner Museum; www.gardnermuseum.org

A Bach cycle, too

Speaking of cycles, Emmanuel Music is presenting all six of Bach's keyboard partitas in a series of weekly noontime concerts. Previous years have seen similar offerings of the works for solo violin and cello. The series begins next Thursday with Emmanuel's associate conductor, Michael Beattie, playing the Fourth Partita, and ends with Robert Levin playing the Sixth on March 25. All concerts are free and take place in the Lindsey Chapel of Emmanuel Church.

www.emmanuelmusic.org ■

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