

REVIEW

Quartet shines in mastery of the musical nuances

BY DERYK BARKER
Times Colonist staff

"I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again... each night, on retiring to bed, I hope I may not wake again, and each morning but recalls yesterday's grief."

Franz Schubert's letter to his friend Leopold Kupelweiser was dated March 31, 1824, the month in which he completed what is, for many, his finest string quartet, D.810 in D minor, known (although not by its composer) as "Death and the Maiden." Yet there are still those who would claim the work has no extra-musical connotations.

The Lafayette String Quartet closed Saturday night's concert with a superb reading of the quartet, forceful and rhythmically vital in the fast movements, eloquent and lyrical in the slow. From the dramatically arresting opening chords, to the break-neck close, the quartet exhibited total sympathy with, and complete mastery of, the music.

Space precludes my listing all of the many interpretive details that stand out, but I cannot omit to mention the sinister feline grace of the opening of the last movement, the stunning control of its final coda, Pamela Highbaugh Aloni's eloquent cello in the *andante*'s second variation, or the washed-out, almost spectral sound of that movement's opening: Rarely has Schubert's oft-quoted (albeit possibly apocryphal) remark — "It sometimes seems to me as if I did not belong to this world at all" — seemed quite so apposite.

Once upon a time it was considered witty to claim that the "best thing Arnold Schoenberg ever produced" was his pupil, Alban Berg.

Perhaps time, and greater familiarity, have given greater perspective; now we can see that the differ-

ON STAGE

Who: Lafayette String Quartet

Where: Phillip T Young Recital Hall

When: Sept. 27

ences between Schoenberg and his two greatest pupils, Berg and Webern, are almost as great as, if not greater than, the similarities.

Berg's Quartet, Op.3 is a dense and intense work. Familiarity with the music undoubtedly pays dividends, enabling the listener better to understand Berg's musical structure; for all its atonality, and its eeriness, Berg's music is always based in lyricism — and human emotion.

All of which could readily be discerned in the Lafayette's performance on Saturday; the quartet has been playing this music for some years, and their familiarity with it was both evident and evidently beneficial, combining to make a taut and highly dramatic account. Any audience members who did not respond positively (and I confess I noticed few, if any) may well never come to terms with Berg's music.

The concert opened with Haydn's Quartet Op.76 No.5. If one were to hold a string quartet competition and limit the repertoire to a single composer, Haydn would surely be that composer. Quartets who can browbeat us with their Beethoven, beguile us with their Brahms and shatter us with their Shostakovich, so often make a complete dog's breakfast of a Haydn quartet. Haydn's music contains so much more than it would seem from the printed score, but these subtleties cannot be forced.

When, therefore, I say that the performance of the Haydn was all but ideal, it is intended as perhaps the greatest single compliment in this review. A thoroughly satisfying evening.