

Saturday, October 21, 2006

After 20 years, their passion is still strong

TAMARA BERNSTEIN

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Lafayette String Quartet

At the Jane Mallett Theatre in Toronto on Thursday

String quartets are often compared to marriages – and as in conjugal relationships, the fact that a quartet lasts decades together doesn't guarantee that it's flourishing. In fact, big-name string quartets who've stayed together long past their sell-by date are among the saddest spectacles on the concert circuit.

Happily, the Lafayette String Quartet's 20th anniversary concert at Music Toronto was cause for nothing but celebration. I hadn't heard the group for years, and while I've always been a fan, it was a joy to find that violinists Ann Elliott-Goldschmid and Sharon Stanis, violist Joanna Hood and cellist Pamela Highbaugh Aloni just keep getting better, as individual artists and as an ensemble. (Amazingly, the group hasn't had a single change of personnel in its entire history.) The first thing that grabbed you was their sound. It's not the aggressive, quasi-hysterical sound that so many modern string players mistake for expressivity. It's a gentle, mellow but perfectly focused sound that I used to think came from the Amati instruments they played. But it must have been coming from their sensibilities as well, since they haven't had use of those instruments for years.

The four women brought the sweetest of passion, and the most passionate sweetness, to Haydn's Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2, and Mendelssohn's Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13. They also struck a happy balance between the heart-on-sleeve romanticism of the Russian school, passed on from their mentor, the late violinist Rostislav Dubinsky, and the clarity of musical gesture and transparency of texture so central to period performance.

The Haydn – apparently the first piece they ever performed together as a quartet – opened the concert with a relaxed expansiveness, and unfolded with conversational wit and an operatic sense of drama. It was a joy to hear truly soft playing when the composer calls for it.

John Burke's String Quartet, which the Canadian composer wrote for the group in 1994, proved a tightly coiled, dramatic work that made extensive use of tremolos. Although the composer spins his wheels toward the end, the piece is beautifully written for strings; its swiftly changing colours and characters, biting chromaticisms and tarantella-like whirling recast musical gestures from the past into modern idioms. The quartet gave a visceral, riveting performance that brought out the undulating sensuality of the piece.

But the Lafayette's soaring performance of the Mendelssohn was the highlight of the concert. Again, Highbaugh Aloni's sweet but beautifully present sound gave the upper voices security and freedom. In the first movement, Elliott-Goldschmid announced the full theme with an aching sweetness and sense of fulfillment that carried us universes beyond the printed notes. The pure love that sang from the two violins, when they were joined in unison at the climax of the movement, was one of the most thrilling moments I've experienced in a quartet concert.

In the folk-like theme of the third movement, Elliott-Goldschmid led breathtaking changes of colour and character. The finale, which opens with an operatic "recitative," sizzled without ever losing the tenderness that bathed the entire piece. In the final pages of the piece, in fact, Mendelssohn apparently quotes a phrase from one of his love songs. The unheard words that go with the phrase are: "She who feels with me and stays ever true to me." It was a perfect, and touching, way for these four musical soulmates to end their 20th anniversary tour program.