

# Quartet's vigor, wit shatter gender and time barriers easily

By Richard Nilsen  
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The all-female Lafayette String Quartet played the all-male music of Charles Ives with such wit and vigor that I expect never to hear it better played.

Ives' Second String Quartet, which is marinated in testosterone, was the central piece of an extremely intelligent program that began with an early Beethoven quartet and ended with the proper dessert of the Ravel quartet.

Ives was a gnarly New Englander who mixed equal portions of Yankee ingenuity, 19th-century transcendentalism and a rash, quirky rudeness. His music, most of it written before World War I, is the most thoroughly American ever written.

But there is nothing in it of feminine grace, nothing of good taste. Once, when an audience was booing his music, Ives stood up and yelled back at them, "Stand up and take your music like a man!"

He wrote the Second Quartet, at least in part, as a response to hearing a quartet of musicians who, he complained, "played like women."

So the Second Quartet is bracing, almost lacerating. Ives described it in a note on the score as a "string quartet for four men — who converse,

## MUSIC REVIEW

### LAFAYETTE STRING QUARTET

Thursday at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts.

discuss, argue (in re 'Politick'), fight, shake hands, shut up — then walk up the mountainside to view the firmament!"

#### Players take it in stride

Well, the question of gender has become a little more complex since Ives' day, and I don't know anyone who would complain that the Lafayette Quartet "played like women." Their manner was neither defined nor circumscribed by gender; it was merely wonderful.

In the second movement, "Arguments," they even brought a chuckle to the usually dour Phoenix Chamber Music Society audience, as the arguing musicians clearly laid out their political views.

The cello and viola displayed their patriotism with a bit of *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*; the second violin argued against nationalism, saying all

men are brothers, with a phrase from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy"; then the first violin chimed in with a cynical, "All men are brothers, hah — Cain and Abel, maybe," in a rendition of *Marching Through Georgia*. (One of the odd things about Ives is how literal-minded his music is.)

The opening Beethoven A-major quartet, Op. 18 No. 5, was another very masculine piece, played with spirit and cohesion. And after the meat and potatoes of Beethoven and Ives, the Ravel was like a butterscotch pudding, tasty and sweet. (Ives would have hated it; he'd have called it an "ear massage.")

#### Time proves no obstacle

The Lafayette Quartet was a last-minute substitute for the Melos Quartet of Germany, who canceled their American tour on advice of the German government, respecting the threat of airline terrorism. The Lafayette flew into Phoenix at 3 p.m. Thursday, played an 8 p.m. concert and flew out the next morning at 6, to get back to Detroit for another concert Friday evening.

As their playing indicated, "above and beyond the call of duty" is normal operating procedure for the Lafayette Quartet.