

The Lafayette Quartet At Twenty

Lafayette String Quartet:

Ann Elliott-Goldschmid, violin
Sharon Stanis, violin
Joanna Hood, viola
Pamela Highbaugh Aloni, cello

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By Deryk Barker

"The significance of chamber music is that in dealing with the intimate it can attain to the ineffable. Chamber music conceives itself as a world of sound that has external boundaries but no internal ones." I know few music-lovers who would dispute Hans Werner Henze's claim; furthermore, for many, the string quartet is the ne plus ultra of chamber music. □

On Saturday night, the Lafayette String Quartet celebrated their first twenty years together, twenty years which have evidently been more than well spent. Moreover, they succeeded in "dealing with the intimate" in the less-than-ideal surroundings of the Farquhar Auditorium - the inevitable venue, really, considering how many fans the quartet have.

The evening opened with Joseph Haydn's Quartet in C, Op.20 No.2.

I have written in another place that for me Haydn is the acid test of a string quartet, the quartet's equivalent of Mozart for pianists: it looks so simple on the page, but...

Saturday's performance of Op.20 No.2 was a model of stylish, elegant and relaxed playing - everything a Haydn quartet should be. Tempos were all perfectly judged - indeed, it would be difficult to imagine better. I dislike singling out highlights from a performance, particularly when it was at as uniformly high a level as this; I shall merely mention a few touches which seemed to me to epitomise exactly why this was such fine Haydn playing.

Firstly, a big "thank you" for playing the first movement exposition repeat, although this is hardly unique. But consider the opening of the development section, where the music slips into the minor: a less-experienced quartet (and the Lafayettes themselves were not unculpable in earlier times) would force the music here. Saturday's performance never lacked drive or momentum, but the music never felt strained.

Similarly, in the slow movement, there was plenty of drama, but never more than the music could bear. After the gently lilting minuet, the wonderful fugal finale was all controlled excitement and gentle humour.

This was simply the finest Haydn playing I have heard in a very long time indeed. I could have left the hall immediately afterwards and still felt the evening was well spent.

John Burke tells us that Reiki is a Japanese word meaning "universal life energy" and that the intention of his music is that the musicians become "healers: facilitators of a state of harmony in the listener."

I was probably in the wrong frame of mind, as I was necessarily concentrating on the music, whereas Burke tells us that the "sound gestures serve an energetic rather than an aesthetic function."

Aesthetically the music is not difficult to describe - although, as it consisted entirely of slow-moving, pianissimo chords, with many harmonics and a goodly helping of glissando, it must be incredibly difficult to play. Yet the Lafayettes made it look positively easy.

Stylistically I heard echoes of Morton Feldman, Gyorgy Ligeti and Arvo Pärt, but the music did not sound either derivative or an amalgam of incompatible influences.

One drawback of such quiet music was made clear to those of us sitting in the rear half of the hall; a minute or two into the performance one listener felt it necessary to inform the rest of us that "I can't hear a damn thing!"

Fair enough, but was there really any need to tell us again - twice?

In the spring of 1827, while on holiday, Felix Mendelssohn fell in love. Unlike most holiday romances, this one resulted in more than simply a handful of fond memories. Mendelssohn was firstly inspired to compose a setting of his friend Johann Droyson's poem "Ist Es Wahr?" (From its first line: "Is it true that you are always waiting for me in the arbour'd walk?")

The song was published as his Op.9 No.1 and its opening three-note phrase ("Ist Es Wahr?") became the melodic cell upon which his String Quartet in A minor, Op.13 is based. (As an aside, and in true Nineteenth century fashion, Mendelssohn's Op.13 quartet was composed before Op.12)

This is evidently - evident both from the frequency of performance and from the performances themselves - music with which the Lafayettes feel a particular affinity: many groups celebrating their anniversary would have chosen Beethoven's Op.132, the work which inspired the Mendelssohn. But the Lafayettes obviously feel that the Mendelssohn quartet, despite its composer's tender age (eighteen), has attributes other than mere flattery (of which, as we all know, imitation is the sincerest form).

The work's opening was solemn and rich-hued and led to a fiery allegro. The slow movement's fugue was exceptionally well contoured and the movement's close especially lovely. The Intermezzo was charming, with the sotto voce trio delicately handled.

The most obvious resemblance to Beethoven's model is the dramatic violin recitative, over tremolando accompaniment, which opens the finale, and the vigorous music which follows it. Here the tension was maintained superbly until the final coda, where the work's opening music reappears.

A marvellous performance from every perspective.

After their well-deserved standing ovation, the quartet gave us a brief encore, the finale of Haydn's Op.20 No.4, which was imbued with all the same qualities as No.2 earlier in the evening.

Twenty years is a landmark in any relationship; the Lafayette Quartet are superb musicians and have developed into a world-class ensemble.

Long may they flourish..