



Simmering intimacy and intensity

The Ying Quartet's recital for The Friends of Chamber Music was a gripping performance of Schulhoff, Janáček, and Beethoven works that plumbed the depth of human emotion.

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By: Lee Hartman

The Ying Quartet's Saturday night recital for The Friends of Chamber Music at the Folly Theater was beyond satisfying. The ensemble's program of works by Erwin Schulhoff, Leoš Janáček, and Ludwig van Beethoven explored a ferocious psychology that flowed from the composers' pens.

Hearing Erwin Schulhoff's Five Pieces after just hearing his other string quartet performed last year by the Ariel Quartet made this performance even more elucidating. Schulhoff's treatment of traditional dances, filtered through his post-WWI mind, recalled strains of Dvořák at his most fiery. But instead of a pale imitation of Dvořák, Schulhoff's work explores what was at the time avant garde, and the piece is all the stronger for it as the timbres and vitality of the piece are all the more interesting. None of this means anything without a capable group of performers, and the Ying Quartet delivered in spades. The standout movement was the second, "Alla Serenata: Allegretto con moto." The players, though playing *con sordino*, managed to achieve and maintain a true forte at the climax with the *col legno* and *sul ponticello* techniques just adding more compelling layers. Cellist David Ying shined in the concluding Tarantella with an exceptionally focused sound in his rapidly bowed lowest register. The final push of the Tarantella captured that beautiful balance of recklessness and stability as the group seemed to play faster and faster and faster even still. It was a breathless conclusion, immaculately performed. The fourth movement Tango could have used some more of this rawness as it sounded too polished for its gritty genesis.

Leoš Janáček's String Quartet No. 1, "Kreutzer Sonata" takes its inspiration from the Tolstoy novella, which follows a jealous husband whose wife, a pianist, is wrongly accused and ultimately murdered on suspicion that she was having an affair with her violinist as they played Beethoven's "Kreutzer" sonata. This dark material fits Janáček's style perfectly. This quartet changes mood on a dime with first violinist Robin Scott having to go from romantic passages akin to Strauss to savage sawing. My ear and eye were often drawn to Janet Ying, second violinist, however. Her workhorse part had her flying all over her instrument with dextrous clarity and remarkable precision. Violist Phillip Ying was the glue that held it all together as ensemble dynamics seemed to be controlled from his stand. Occasionally the pitch of the cello pizzacatos were distorted when paired with the exact same line that was bowed by the upper strings. That's truly the smallest of complaints in what was a fantastic read full of drama, passion, and horror.

Beethoven's "Rasumovsky" Quartet on paper seems the lightest of the program, but in this middle quartet Beethoven pushes musical expectation. Instead of eight bar phrases, there are nineteen, instead of closely-related key, foreign ones are the norm. Rhythm is playfully wonky. These elements all contributed to making the Schulhoff and Janáček even more successful in retrospect because the grace with which the Ying Quartet highlighted these vast differences and monumental paradigm shifts made the Beethoven all the more accessible. The performance of the middle two movements (a scherzando second and a mesto third) were the best of the best: emotive, gorgeous, and playful.