

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Ancora Quartet lets the Critics Choose

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This season, the Ancora Quartet's recitals will feature works by Schubert, Haydn and Hindemith in a "Critics' Choice" season chosen by some of the people who pay closest attention.

Of the three concerts in the Critics' Choice Season, which begins this Saturday, John W. Barker of Isthmus selected the first set, Jacob Stockinger, formerly of The Capital Times, chose the January program, and Norman Gilliland of Wisconsin Public Radio chose the content for the final performance, set for May.

Ancora Quartet, founded in 2000, is comprised of Leanne Kelso League and Robin Ryan on violin, Marika Fischer Hoyt on viola and Benjamin Whitcomb on cello. The concert at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 13, at the First Unitarian Society of Madison marks the start of its third season as the string quartet in residence at the Madison church.



Ancora Quartet begins its Critics' Choice Season Saturday at First Unitarian Society of Madison. – Promotional photo

"The critics' season sort of evolved," Fischer Hoyt said. "I'd been consulting with Jake (Stockinger) on e-mail and phone and getting really good advice from him. Then John Barker came to our recitals and started saying nice things to us in person."

But they asked Gilliland first, because Fischer Hoyt knows Gilliland's son, Ross, a professional local string bassist, and the veteran radio personality had asked the Ancora Quartet to record some music for him at the radio station.

"We were afraid to ask, but we started with Norman (Gilliland)," Fischer Hoyt said. "When he was on board it gave us courage to talk to the other two."

Independently of each other, the three critics chose very different seasons.

Barker's program features two Americans. He begins with Arthur Foote's Quartet #2 in E Major, Samuel Barber's Quartet in B Major (containing the famous "Adagio for Strings") and Franz Schubert's challenging Quartet #15 in G Major, D. 887.

The Adagio was detached and orchestrated separately from the rest of Barber's quartet, Barker said.

"It's nice to hear a familiar adagio in that frame," Barker said. "And then the Schubert -- God, I love Schubert. If there's any composer I would've liked to have as a friend ... "

Barker is an emeritus professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who writes freelance music features and reviews for the Isthmus. His personal music collection contains about 47,000 LPs and 40,000 CDs (but who's counting?) Barker was enthusiastic and pleased to help plan Ancora's season.

"I could plan the next 10 years of activity if they would let me," he said.

Stockinger's January program consists of pieces he considers "must-hears." He chose Hadyn's "Quinten Quartet," the Quartet #11 in F Minor by Dmitri Shostakovich and Beethoven's Quartet #16 in F Major.

"I had several criteria," Stockinger said. "They had to be first-rate masterpieces, must-hears. If you're going to learn at all about chamber music these are pieces you should hear."

The quartets he choose share a mood, Stockinger said. They're all from later in each of the composer's careers -- the Beethoven Quartet #16, for example, is the last quartet he wrote before his death. Stockinger calls them "mature works" that "really show the full blossoming of their style and their capabilities."

Stockinger will provide written program notes and conduct a question and answer session after the recital on Saturday, Jan. 31.

"There are touches of humor, but all of these are very serious works," Stockinger said. "They are first-rate masterpieces that are both accessible and enjoyable."

"For me a masterpiece is something, by definition, you go to again and again and again and you never exhaust it. I think they give you a hunger for other string quartets by the same composer and then other string quartets, period."

Gilliland, who hosts classical music on Wisconsin Public Radio from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. each weekday, encountered the Ancora Quartet several years ago, and has had a friendly working relationship with the group since then.

"I wanted to find things that weren't strictly string quartets," Gilliland said, explaining that his choices occasionally dispense with traditional quartet form.

Gilliland's selections for Saturday, May 30, lean more toward the late 1800s and early 20th century with "From My Life," a quartet in E Minor by Bedrich Smetana; "Two Sketches based on Native American Themes" by Charles Griffes and the whimsical "Minimax - Repertorium fur Militrmusik" by Paul Hindemith.

The Hindemith piece, Gilliland said, "calls for the violist to balance the bow on the tip of his nose." Gilliland is not clear yet if the violinist can do this.

The three men have chosen a good variety of classical, romantic and 20th century literature; Gilliland called it "a nice broad season."

Each program, as Stockinger put it, "represents a personal choice, but I also hope it's a choice that appeals to a lot of people.