

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Ancora String Quartet pit Beethoven vs. Tchaikovsky: Clash of the Titans

Press: Isthmus

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Date: Friday June 6, 2008



Tight focus meets passionate lushness.

Given the long, rich history of the UW's Pro Arte Quartet, it is easy to overlook the existence of another resident ensemble whose rise to distinction demands recognition and support: the Ancora String Quartet.

They came into existence in 2000, and by 2003 had achieved their present membership. The players are all young and widely active. The newest member, cellist Benjamin Whitcomb, is on the faculty of UW-Whitewater. Violinists Leanne Kelso League and Robin Ryan (a lawyer in her spare time), as well as violist Marika Fischer Hoyt, currently serve in either or both the Madison Symphony Orchestra and the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, two of them also playing with the Madison Bach Musicians. After using for some years the facilities of the First Unitarian Society, Ancora have finished their second season as the institution's quartet in residence, a continuing arrangement of mutual benefit.

The last of their three seasonal concerts, on May 31, offered a typically bold and adventurous program, consisting of two very different works. Beethoven's "Quartet in C, Op. 59, No. 3" is the last of the three works commissioned by, and now named for, the Russian diplomat Count Razumovsky. Ancora plunged into its recklessly inventive first movement with absolute confidence, and then brought brooding spookiness to the second, surely among the greatest of string-quartet movements. The deceptively

gracious Menuetto led them into the unstoppable gusto of Beethoven's frenetically fugal finale, which made a fine display of the refined skill, disciplined ensemble playing and joyous conviction they bring to their work.

Beethoven against Tchaikovsky? Popular as is the music of the latter master, his chamber music is sadly underrated. His ravishing string sextet, "Souvenir de Florence," is occasionally heard, but his magnificent (and demanding) Piano Trio, if respected, is less frequently played, while his string quartets are rarely encountered. That is a pity, as the enterprising Ancora demonstrated by presenting the second of his three published quartets, the F major, Op. 22.

Whereas the Beethoven quartet required, and received, a tightly focused sound, Ancora succeeded in transforming their playing into the passionate lushness that Tchaikovsky called for. They flung themselves gallantly into the highly charged first movement, became more whimsical for the quirky second, and then probed the soulful beauties of the third before wading into the wild exuberance of the fourth.

As always, the players joined the audience in a generous post-concert reception.