

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Ancora String Quartet Comes Into Its Own with Haydn, Beethoven, Shostakovich

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For the latest of its concerts this season the Ancora String Quartet, resident at the First Unitarian Society Saturday evening, chose to play in the original meeting house, rather than in the Society's new and larger auditorium. What this concert reiterated was the impression that the Ancora Quartet gets better and better each time.

This was the second in its Critics' Choice series, performing works recommended by local critics and commentators. This time the "decider" was Jacob Stockinger, long of The Capital Times. He put together a stylistic span of works catching composers at the end of their careers. Thus, he selected the D-minor Quartet, Op. 76, No. 2, by Haydn, known as the "Quinten" or "Fifths" Quartet for its challenging exploitation of that interval; Beethoven's "Quartet No. 16" in D major, Op. 135; and the "Quartet No. 11" in F minor, Op. 122, by Shostakovich.

Consisting of seven short and epigrammatic movements, the Shostakovich work might seem the most challenging of the three. Certainly its lean and ascetic tonal palette, and its straining of the players as individual voices within their ensemble, tested the Ancoristas seriously. At times I missed some of the gutsy passion that Slavic quartets have brought to this composer's music. Still, the Ancora performance was totally committed, cogent and absolutely mesmerizing.

The other two works struck me as examples of toughness under cover of grace. One might not think this of Haydn as normally stereotyped. But the often overlooked dark corners of his output were evident in this particular example, not least in canonic minuet, with its distinct suggestions of Eastern-European and Balkan roots.

Conversely, in his last string quartet, Beethoven seemed to be relaxing from his "late period" strivings. Yet Beethoven never gives up pressing challenges. Remember, this is the quartet whose final movement begins with the enigmatic motto, "Muß es sein?" ("Must it be?").

What this concert reiterated was the impression that the Ancora Quartet gets better and better each time. These four players have honed their ensemble rapport to a fare-thee-well. Each has a strong personality, but they merge in more than just the sum of their parts. I think it can be said that, in discipline, expressiveness, and lustre, they have equalled the UW's Pro Arte Quartet, long the gold standard of quartet playing locally. But the Ancora performances are still modestly attended, and the group seems marginalized in Madison's rich musical life.

Surely it is time for our city's music-lovers to recognize and support the treasure they have in the Ancora Quartet. Attention must be paid!

