

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Interview with the Ancora String Quartet

Press: The Well-Tempered Ear

By: Jacob Stockinger

Date: June 11, 2010

This Saturday night the Ancora String Quartet (below) wraps up its current season. The concert will take place at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, June 12 at the First Unitarian Society of Madison, 900 University Bay Drive. The appealing and accessible program includes Felix Mendelssohn's Quartet No. 1 in E-Flat Major, Op. 12 and Antonin Dvorak's Quartet No. 13 (his last) in G Major, Op. 106. Tickets can be purchased at the door directly before the concert and are \$12 general admission, \$10 for students and seniors, and \$6 for children under the age of 12.

Here is a link to the quartet's web site: <http://www.ancoraquartet.com/>



Ancora members are (above, from left): violinists Leanne Kelso League and Robin Ryan; cellist Benjamin Whitcomb; and violist Marika Fischer Hoyt.

Violist Marika Fischer Hoyt (above right) recently spoke to The Ear via e-mail about the state of the Ancora and about the program of the upcoming concert:

What is the state of the Ancora String Quartet?

This season has gone very well, artistically. We feel that our group balance continues to improve. We're able to achieve an increasingly blended sound in general, and yet each player is more able to sing out when she or he has the melody. We're pleased, in particular, with how the Beethoven Op. 132 improved

with each of our performances this season, at the First Unitarian Society (below) at the Stoughton Opera House, peaking at the Chazen performance on March 14th.

How has this year has gone financially, artistically and attendance-wise?

Despite the economic downturn, our audience numbers and finances have remained stable this year. We have figured out how to get the most return on our hours of practice and rehearsal, performing each program several times at area venues, in addition to our appearances at FUS. This allows us to further hone our performance skills and maximize our profit from each program. Even so, our recital income is more in the category of an honorarium than an actual salary, but we're really happy to be able to work together and play the incredible string quartet literature. We just love what we do. Administratively, the big change this year was the addition to our forces of Abby Ballain, our wonderful new manager.

What are your plans for the next season with works and dates?

We'll open our season at FUS on Saturday, October 9th, 2010 at 7:30 pm, with a program featuring my personal favorite string quartet of all time, the Beethoven 'Harp' Quartet, Op. 74, in E-flat Major. This quartet is Beethoven at his absolute best; poised and yet rhapsodic; brilliantly fresh and innovative, yet always expressing the noble architecture of his musical ideas with athletic grace. Each movement is perfect – chamber music doesn't get any better. The Beethoven will be followed by the intensely passionate and lush Brahms Piano Quintet in F Minor, with UW-Whitewater faculty Myung-Hee Chung at the keyboard. Ms. Chung holds degrees from Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, has won many piano competitions, and appears regularly in concert as a soloist or with the UW-Whitewater Trio. We look forward to working with her and sinking our teeth into that Brahms. We may throw in a movement of Bach, too, just to complete the three musical B's.

For the Spring concert (date to be announced), Karl Lavine, principal cellist of the Madison Symphony and Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, will join us for a performance of the deeply sublime Schubert Quintet D. 956 in C Major, which is declared to be "*by far the greatest work ever written for a string quartet with an extra cello,*" by David Patrick Stearns, classical music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer. We are thrilled to perform this work with Karl; he is a consummate cellist, a master of his craft, and the concert should be just gorgeous.

What about other tours or dates you did and your growing place in the community?

We were very excited to make our successful debut at the Stoughton Opera House in November 2009, and are gratified to have been invited back there next November. We also performed last fall for the second time at the beautiful Arts Center down in Monroe, Wis., and have been invited to partner with several local organizations there next season.

You work a lot with young people and students, don't you?

We are also very excited about our work with young people – we gave a master class last year at WYSO (Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras, for instance, coaching a very promising string quartet of young musicians, and were guest clinicians last summer at a strings festival at UW-Whitewater. We've also given guest performances at some local public school strings classes. We strongly encourage young players to discover the joy of playing chamber music, we welcome young people at our own recitals, and hope to do more coaching and outreach in the future.

How do you see your growing place in the community's classical music scene?

It is difficult to assess our place in the community, from the inside. It used to be that UW's outstanding Pro Arte Quartet was the only professional string quartet in town, but now there are several other excellent local ensembles performing this amazing repertoire. It is a testament to Madison's rich cultural involvement that so many quartets can maintain regular performing schedules. The Ancora String Quartet is unusual in this roster, in that we are independent of any sponsoring organization, be it the university or the symphony.

We have a relationship with First Unitarian Society, but we rehearse on our own time and our own dime (maybe that's part of why Isthmus' John Barker calls us "plucky") and we make every decision ourselves. Given all this, I can say that the Ancora String Quartet has a regular crowd of fans, that we're garnering an ever-increasing string of positive reviews, and that we're regularly invited back to perform at the Chazen Museum, the Stoughton Opera House, the Monroe Arts Center and other venues.

Do you have comments about the works you'll play this Saturday?

I love this program, although I didn't choose either of the two works. Robin chose the Mendelssohn Op. 12 in E-flat, and I'm sure she's getting tired of me saying, every time we sit down to rehearse it, that "I just love this piece!" The first movement's lyrical, exquisite phrasing recalls that of the Beethoven 'Harp' right down to the opening rhythm of the slow introduction.

It's a young work – Mendelssohn was only 20 when he composed it, but what it might lack in depth, compared to Beethoven's middle-period masterpiece, it makes up for in charm.

The second movement, the Canzonetta, has the structure of a Minuet-Trio-Minuet movement, but in duple rather than triple meter. The trio of the movement, a fleet *piu mosso*, gives Mendelssohn the chance to flaunt his signature magical texture of so many of his scherzi — think of the Overture to his "Midsummer Night's Dream."

The third movement is a dreamy, romantic aria for the 1st violin, which is rudely interrupted by exclamatory chords heralding the advent of the 4th movement. This finale opens in the minor mode with a gossamer texture reminiscent of the Canzonetta, but transforms into a repeat of material from the lyrical 1st movement, ending the work on a dreamy note.

Leanne chose the second piece on our program, Dvorak's Op. 106 in G Major, and it contrasts well with Mendelssohn's dreamy quartet. Work by Dvorak (below) is infused with bold colors and dramatic mood swings, with Czech folk songs and folk dance rhythms, haunting introspection and violent outburst.

The first movement is almost bipolar in its oscillations between themes of simple starkness and those of tender yearning. The increasing sense of instability throughout the development section gives the gentle recapitulation a sense of enormous relief!

The Adagio aria in the second movement is not one of romantic dreaminess but rather of turbulent yearning. Towards the end of the movement, the first violinist breaks out of the texture into rhapsodic flight! Whether the quiet ending expresses triumph or resignation, I leave it to the listener to decide. The jaunty third movement scherzo maintains a swinging dance beat, against which Dvorak plays with rhythmic juxtapositions and syncopations, providing lots of energetic fun and ending with a defiant stamp.

The slow introduction to the fourth movement then launches into a sprightly *Allegro con fuoco*, which traverses territory by turns high-spirited and melancholy, always distinguished by rhythmic creativity. Not for Dvorak a canned drumbeat — we see 2 against 3 against 4 in the same beat of a given measure, jagged dotted rhythms, searing unisons, alternations of on-string, off-string and pizzicato, relentless off-beat accents, until our minds are reeling.

But the final, emphatic cadences are expressed with a squareness that echoes the ending of Beethoven's symphonies, leaving no doubt, finally, where the beat really is. Thank goodness!