

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Ancora String Quartet: Musical Sophistication in a Comfortable Space

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The Ancora String Quartet includes (from left) cellist Benjamin Whitcomb, first violinist Leanne Kelso League, violist Marika Fischer Hoyt, and second violinist Robin Ryan. Photo by Katrin Talbot

The pleasure of attending a chamber music performance in a community space lies in combining a satisfying musical experience with a sense of intimacy with the performers. At Saturday evening's Ancora String Quartet concert at the First Unitarian Society, where the quartet is in residence, it was possible to sit only a few feet from the ensemble as they performed and to chat over brownies with its members at a reception afterward.

Shared music, shared food, shared community - the stuff of a good evening.

The program opened with a work by the relatively unknown mid-19th century composer Joachim Raff. Like the Schubert song cycle with which it shares a name but no musical material, Raff's six-movement "Die schöne Müllerin" depicts a young man finding his way in the world.

Raff's quartet features highly accessible musical language. Lovely, pleasant themes characterize the movements representing the protagonist, the maiden and their wedding while those depicting the protagonist's first vision of a mill and his struggle to find the courage to ask the maiden to marry him share a faster pace and sense of agitation.

Given the clarity of musical material, the drama in the cycle stems less from development that occurs within any one movement and more from contrast and change between the movements, and the quartet presented the alternately charming and churning sections with grace.

The second half of the program was Beethoven's Op. 132, a weighty piece that requires expressive and technical dexterity and that the quartet performed compellingly.

The eccentric second movement centers on a simple melody piled on top of an almost obsessively repetitive chromatic accompaniment, and here I would like the quartet to have reveled more in the strangeness of this music. Such touches of the bizarre are one of the distinctive characteristics of late Beethoven, and they deserve extra consideration.

However, the quartet carried off the delicacy of the sustained chords and imitative passages at the beginning of the third, unusually long movement perfectly. Titled by Beethoven "Holy Song of Thanksgiving by a Convalescent to the Divinity," it unfolds by alternating introspective chorale-like sections with faster, more extroverted portions, and the quartet captured the energy of both. The two compositions presented the ensemble in very different configurations. First violinist Leanne Kelso League filled an almost soloistic role in Raff's String Quartet No. 7; Robin Ryan (second violin), Marika Fischer Hoyt (viola) and Benjamin Whitcomb (cello) had greater opportunities with thematic material in the Beethoven.

I do wish that the quartet members would have bridged the distance to the audience before as well as after they played by discussing their programming choices. Particularly in a setting where many audience members will likely see an ensemble perform more than once during a season and when introducing music by an unfamiliar composer, it would be both educational and engaging to learn what performers love best in what they're about to play. To cultivate a sense of enthusiasm for the material before sounding the first note does more than any baked good for a sense of audience investment.

IF YOU GO

The Ancora String Quartet's next Madison area performance will be Saturday, Nov. 7, at 7:30 p.m. at the Stoughton Opera House. Tickets are \$15. Call 608-877-4400 to order tickets. Find more information at www.cityofstoughton.com.