



JERRY DAVIS

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE

James Ehnes and his string quartet present early, middle, and late Beethoven at weeklong festival

By Thomas May

Ehnes Quartet
Nordstrom Recital Hall, Benaroya Hall
Seattle, Washington: Beethoven Festival;
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Last year, James Ehnes released a recording of Soviet composers that juxtaposed his artistry in two contrasting arenas. The first piece features Ehnes as a concert soloist (in Khachaturian's Violin Concerto), but the disc was filled out with a pair of string quartets by Shostakovich (Nos. 7 and 8). While he remains best-known for his searingly beautiful solo playing, the unusual combination of genres conveyed a fuller self-portrait of the violinist: This was his first release introducing the work of the Ehnes Quartet.

The latter project has been taking on increasing significance of late for the Canadian violinist. Although the ensemble first started playing as a quartet in 2010, it wasn't until 2014 that Ehnes and his

colleagues—violinist Amy Schwartz Moretti, violist Richard O'Neill, and cellist Robert deMaine—undertook their first European tour. And in July, the Ehnes Quartet appeared onstage in a series of three programs as the centerpiece of a mini-Beethoven Festival, presented during the first full week of the monthlong Summer Festival of the Seattle Chamber Music Society (where Ehnes has been performing for 21 years and, since 2012, serving as artistic director).

Flying in from Moscow—he was one of this year's judges at the 2015 Tchaikovsky International Violin Competition—Ehnes had just a couple days to catch his breath before launching the festival in Seattle, jet lag or no. On top of that, each of the other players maintains a busy career apart from the quartet: Moretti directs the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings in Georgia,

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O'Neill recently returned from leading and playing at a chamber festival in Seoul, and deMaine is principal cello of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

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playing together in months. The way they sang together in the Adagio of the sixth of Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets displayed a magical unanimity—a consensus reached not merely by technical means but via a shared philosophy of sound. Along with this display of lyrical legato, the Scherzo showcased a superb rhythmic incisiveness, fully attuned to the rich vein of humor that's essential to grasping Beethoven's string quartets.

In fact, such rhythmic precision—married to a nuanced articulation of accents and dynamic contrasts—emerged as one hallmark throughout the festival of the Ehnes Quartet's interpretation of Beethoven. That, in turn, underscored how the players benefit from an intuitively shared understanding of the way musical time operates in these masterpieces.

Pacing and tempo choices avoided extremity, remaining free of the occasional exaggeration or warping on which some ensembles rely to emphasize aspects of this music—whether in Beethoven's moments of wildness or otherworldly contemplation.

Overall, Seattle's Summer Festival of Chamber Music—including this Beethoven “festival within the festival”—represents still another of Ehnes' remarkable gifts: his ability to combine imaginative programming with the organizational skills required to juggle the schedules of 46 artists across 13 varied concerts. The guiding idea for the Beethoven Festival was to survey the composer's creativity with a program devoted to each of the three canonical periods, pairing an example of his string quartets from each with another Beethoven chamber work.

That in itself made for some intriguing comparisons and contrasts within and between the three programs. An account of the Op. 1, No. 1, Piano trio (with violinist Alexander Velinzon—who is leaving his post as the Seattle Symphony's concertmaster, cellist Ronald Thomas, and pianist Anna Polonsky) reinforced the Haydnesque invention of the Op. 18 selection—even if the former's performance lacked the interpretive coherence that made the string quartet such a pleasure—while Beethoven's rarely heard Op. 16 Piano and Wind Quintet brought out the Mozart factor in his early development. It was particularly enlightening to encounter the magisterial Archduke Trio, Op. 97, on the same program as the very last quartet (Op. 135): where the trio mimicked an expansively “orchestral” sound within a chamber configuration, the Op. 135 Quartet in F major was heard to pose its enigmas with spellbinding concision and intimacy.

Along with the Beethoven, each program additionally included one 20th-century chamber work, likewise inviting comparison and contrast: Ravel's Piano Trio, in which Ehnes also took part, together with SSO principal cellist Efe Baltacıgil and pianist Orion Weiss, for a dreamy, even steamy, performance; the 1954 Trio No. 1 by Leon Kirchner, thorny yet filled with spectacular gestures reminiscent of the abstract painting of the era; and the precocious Trio No. 1 by the teenaged Shostakovich—an exciting moment of a young composer discovering his voice, while Beethoven was reshaping his at the very end of his life.

Despite the chronological framework—starting with Beethoven's first published opus on Monday evening and ending, on Friday, with his final piece of chamber music, composed a year before his death—the Ehnes Quartet approached each of their three performances without pushing a particular narrative of development. They didn't make the Op. 18, B-flat Quartet sound more inherently “classical,” for example. Instead, it resounded as an innovative work on its own terms: The interplay of the slow (*La malincolia*) and fast sections in the last movement almost foreshadowed the question-and-answer dialogue in the corresponding movement of Op. 135.

And as far-reaching as the language of the late quartets becomes, from the start of

their Op. 59, No. 2, in E minor (the “middle-period” Razumovsky quartet on their second program), the Ehnes ensemble seemed to be sailing out into an astonishingly adventurous new world. Theatrically poised pauses after the slashing chords that launch the piece again pointed to the players' sensitivity to timing and pace. Ehnes' patrician lyricism, beautifully enhanced by his “Marsick” Stradivari of 1715, eloquently reined in the first movement's most impulsive gestures. In the Adagio (said to encode Beethoven's image of the music of the spheres, inspired by his contemplation of “the starry sky”), the four players gave just the right weight to harmonize their choral passages without sentimentality or oversweetness.

A similar strategy worked wonders in the Lento assai of Op. 135, whose radical simplicity poses challenges of a kind very different from the virtuosity needed for the Razumovsky. And many a quartet gives sway to the temptation to overdo the “eccentric” Beethoven of the late quartets, digging in to highlight the fierce, manic repetitions of Op. 135's Scherzo, for example. Not so here.

I've never encountered a live performance of this quartet overall that displayed greater lucidity and elegance. “Muss es sein?” (“Must it be?”) asks Beethoven at the start of the finale—the movement that gave him so many headaches—and proceeds to answer this with the motto he inscribes with the words “Es muss sein!” (“It must be!”). Ehnes and his colleagues succeeded in persuading their audience—it was a sold-out house for all three concerts—of the inevitability of this music.

Incredibly, this was the first time the Ehnes Quartet had played each of these three compositions together—their tally of the Beethoven quartets has reached six at the Seattle Chamber Music Society Festival and ten when other venues are included. But in June 2016 they will take on the complete cycle in Seoul, performing all 16 quartets in six programs over two weekends.

It just might be time to think of planning a trip to South Korea.

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Thomas May is an internationally published freelance writer. He is also the English program editor for the Lucerne Festival and has published books on Wagner and John Adams.