

Chamber Music Festival Soars with Several Pieces

Written by Zach Carstensen
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Chamber music is highlighted by individuality, expressiveness, and an intimate musical experience. It's a treat for the ears, and a break from the heaviness of orchestral concerts. Fortunately, the Quad Cities has a robust chamber tradition, and much of this can be attributed to the work of Chamber Music Quad Cities (CMQC).

In the 10th year, CMQC's Chamber Music Festival offered much of what's great about chamber music, but it also featured some uneven performances. Spread over two evenings, June 8 and June 11, the festival highlighted works by Brahms, Schubert, and Mendelssohn, and concluded with an all-Beethoven concert.

During the first evening, hometown favorites Serena Canin, Greg Sauer, and Thomas Sauer dazzled the Wallenberg Hall audience with a performance of Mendelssohn's D Minor piano trio. Even though the trio did not perform in a highly polished fashion, their reading of the trio was rugged, youthful, and bursting with energy. Canin, Sauer, and Sauer led the audience on a romp that was gigantic for chamber music. Particularly, Greg Sauer's thematic introductions guided the threesome toward a different but tasty interpretation.

The second concert focused on Beethoven's developmental stages (early, middle, and late) and three separate forms (cello sonata, string quartet, and piano trio) and was the more popular of the two.

Beginning the evening was a daring performance of the *Sonata for Cello & Piano in G Minor*. As I sat listening to this particularly somber piece, on the edge of my seat, I felt the chills climb my spine, reminding me why I love Beethoven so much. Colin Carr performed magnificently on cello, and Thomas Sauer kept pace with an equally moving performance on piano. They gripped the audience in breathless anticipation with their interpretation of the opening Adagio, followed by a blazing Allegro tinged with youthful, uninhibited playing. Despite being an inspiring performance, Sauer's piano sometimes dominated the performance, and this anomaly led to a slight imbalance, but one that did not cripple the music.

Together they illuminated Beethoven's changing view of the cello sonata. The themes and role

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of the cello shift from contrasting elements to complimentary ones. In fact, the effect is an equity between the piano and cello, which helps build the piece and convey the feelings much more accurately. There are even times when the instruments attempt to imitate one another.

Unfortunately the follow-up piece, the *F Minor String Quartet Op. 95*, was a disappointment but proved to be a crowd favorite. I suspect appreciation was enhanced by a lengthy description of the work by violinist Mark Steinberg. Introspective and quick, the quartet is a unique work, changing the string-quartet paradigm and encouraging heavier subject matter and structure. Shades of Beethoven and his late quartets are frequently heard in the quartets of Bartok and Shostakovich.

Though the work marks a musical moment for Beethoven, the ensemble performing the work missed the mark, leaving a jumbled mess that sounded like Bartok and not Beethoven.

It was very clear the performers – violinists Mark Steinberg and Serena Canin, violist Caroline Wolff, and cellist Greg Sauer – knew the music. I believe the problems emanated from an attempt by each performer to have his or her voice heard over the others, whether or not it was required. It didn't help that the violins needed to be tuned.

Concluding the concert was a tepid performance of Beethoven's *Trio in G Major*. Though there was nothing particularly wrong with the performance, it lacked some of the inspiration that typified performances of the *G Minor Sonata* and the Mendelssohn *Trio*.

The concerts also enabled loyalists to be reacquainted with Quad Cities products Greg and Thomas Sauer. The festival's programming was diverse, and the performances were generally acceptable. Even with its problems, the festival was a delightful change of pace.