



[SFCV STORE](#) | [RSS](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [DONATE](#) | [JOIN THE FRIENDS OF SFCV](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [ABOUT SFCV](#)

CHAMBER MUSIC REVIEW

Two Brahms Quintets Are Better Than One

January 19, 2003

By George Thomson

There have always been those who have not found the music of Brahms to their taste — Tchaikovsky and Bernard Shaw are two famous examples who come to mind — just as there are, apparently, people who do not care for chocolate. For the rest of us, Sunday's program at Berkeley's Hertz Hall offered something akin to a chocoholic's fantasy meal: not one but two great quintets of Brahms, performed by the Tokyo String Quartet and guests. The incomparably rich performance was a delight from start to finish.

Since their last Bay Area visit, the Tokyo Quartet have acquired a new first violinist, Martin Beaver, who replaced Mikhail Kopelman last year. Any doubts as to whether the newcomer would fit in with the ensemble's famously burnished sound were quickly dispelled in the opening work, the Viola Quintet Op. 111. This work, for which the Quartet (Beaver, second violinist Kikuei Ikeda, violist Kazuhide Isomura, and cellist Clive Greensmith) was joined by San Francisco Symphony Principal Violist Geraldine Walther, was intended by Brahms to be his farewell to composition. It combines intensely wrought, complex textures with joyful effusion. Beaver's playing sailed atop it all magnificently, while always seeming completely integrated with the whole in a way that Kopelman's, incandescent as it was, did not.

Indeed, the integral nature of the performance was especially impressive, given that the work is invariably performed by a quartet with one "extra" member — usually the first or second viola. Walther, playing second to the Tokyo's Isomura, seemed completely at home, even spurring Isomura on a bit; seldom has all the rich interplay among the middle parts been so clearly articulated, nor has the sense of enjoyment from the players been so palpable.

Disciplined power

From a technical standpoint the sheer density and projection of sound that these five produced is remarkable; the violists in particular were thrillingly strong, yet there was never a disagreeable sense of force or over-reaching. What Greensmith made of the famously tricky opening melody is a fine example. It did not seem "effortless," for it takes considerable effort to project the broad, arching line through the dense accompaniment (here not played "safe" by the other four but in a quite busy manner). It conveyed the sense of achieving, of triumph, that is yet more satisfying.

Throughout the quintet, the ensemble refused to yield to the work's rhythmic intricacy as many performances do, often resulting in readings that are correct but square. Here the rhythmic elements were always under control but phrases nonetheless enjoyed plenty of breathing space. Lyrical moments were always allowed their due (Isomura's slow movement melody and cadenza, for example), never falling into mawkishness. At times the relentless pulse was brought almost to a standstill, even in the delightfully hectic Gypsy coda to the Finale, before bounding back stronger than before.

After intermission the Quartet returned with pianist Max Levinson for the Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34. Levinson, a Southern California native now living in Boston, is a formidable partner for the ensemble. His playing captured, and triumphed over, the inherently contradictory personality of this difficult work — cast by Brahms first as a cello quintet, then a Sonata for Two Pianos, and only later in its final form. At times the piano must evoke an orchestral tutti, elsewhere an orchestral accompaniment, and at other times a lyrical equal partner to the strings.

Boldness meets solidity

Levinson was every bit up to the challenge. His loudest playing sometimes had a hard edge — one noticed that the Quartet were arrayed around him, well out of the "path" of the piano's sound — but it was most often a welcome fit with the quartet's solid sonority. His incisive articulation in the thorny Scherzo was a good match for the strings, whose sound playing "off the string," with bouncing bows, was bold and

almost rough.

The lyrical melodies in the slow movement, in the trio of the scherzo, and in the finale were affecting, though none matched the serenity of the program's first half. Likewise the extended coda of the finale, in which Brahms rather stacks the deck with sudden surprises, was rendered with an implacable, almost grim energy. It was not an ending to bring the audience immediately to its feet, though many stood; it was, however, one to bring the victorious fivesome back onstage four times for well-deserved bows.

(George Thomson is Associate Conductor of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra, and Director of its "Under Construction" new music reading concerts. He is also Director of the [Virtuoso Program](#) at San Domenico School in San Anselmo.)

©2003 George Thomson, all rights reserved

[SFCV STORE](#) | [RSS](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [DONATE](#) | [JOIN THE FRIENDS OF SFCV](#) | [ADVERTISE](#) | [ABOUT SFCV](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

A project of the Community Initiative Funds of the San Francisco Foundation

©2008 *San Francisco Classical Voice*

Web site design and development by Gore Creative

Powered by **WordPress**