

Fine Arts Quartet lives up to its name and tradition

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By Alan Becker

Founded in Chicago in 1946, the Fine Arts Quartet quickly developed into one of the most distinguished ensembles of its kind. Over 60 years later it is reassuring to see the group still going strong, albeit with different members. The auditorium at Palm Beach’s Society of the Four Arts, was the perfect acoustical venue for Sunday’s concert by these superb players.

Juan Crisostomo de Arriaga’s First String Quartet was an effective if heart-breaking way of opening the program. Called by some “The Spanish Mozart”, Arriaga was born in 1806, joined a professional string quartet at the age of 10, studied at the Paris Conservatory, wrote an opera at the age of 13, became a professor of the Conservatory at the age of 18, and promptly died of a lung infection before he reached the age of 20. His music is of a consistently high quality, and his early demise most certainly took from us one of the most promising composers of any generation.

What especially distinguishes the Arriaga quartet, is the skill in which the composer handles his material, and the high level of inspired creativity. The four movements follow the Haydn-Mozart style but add a lyricism that looks forward to the early romantics. The Fine Arts ensemble drew forth a silky sound that was never forced, classically restrained, and perfectly blended together. It was good to see the former Miami String Quartet violist Chauncey Patterson as interim member of this group.

Shostakovich’s Quartet No. 7 gave the Fine Arts an opportunity to show their mettle by taking on all of its myriad challenges. At around 12 minutes, it’s the shortest and most compressed of the composer’s quartets. As a master of grotesquerie, Shostakovich packed the music full of sarcasm and technical challenges, which were met with full success at every turn. Moreover, each player was given the opportunity of playing solo as the music was handed back and forth as if tossing a hot potato between each quartet member. All eventually returns to the quiet of the opening, after a brief adventure, or—some may say—nightmare.

It was a bold move to schedule Grieg’s only completed, but infrequently heard, String Quartet. All of the composer’s harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic signatures are present, along with a yearning to break the restraints of the quartet medium and stretch the sonorities to orchestral proportions. It would be untrue to state that Grieg reached full success in the writing of this quartet. It has all of the charm, beauty, folksiness, and sentimentality for which he is known, but frequently reveals a stretching for effect, a repetition of small ideas, and a general discomfort with the medium. Still, it’s a lovable



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effort and the Fine Arts embraced all of its best qualities with full conviction. Ironically, the same work was being performed by the Delray String Quartet a few miles south at the exact same time—Grieg's quartet finally having its day (in South Florida—at least).

The last movement of Haydn's *Lark* Quartet served as an effective encore. The only disappointment was that the entire work was not heard by this ensemble, which continues to rank among the best chamber groups performing today.

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