

Fine Arts Quartet with pianist Anton Kuerti in Toronto

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Kuerti at his best with quartet

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Because it doesn't ordinarily play in Toronto, the distinguished Fine Arts Quartet has flown below the local radar in recent times. It was thus a delight to rediscover this wise and polished ensemble at a Mooredale concert in Toronto on Sunday afternoon. It played string quartets of Haydn (the radiant *Sunrise*, Op. 76 No. 4), Bruckner (the solitary, early C minor) and Shostakovich (the scintillating No. 7), as well as the ravishing Schumann *Piano Quintet* with pianist Anton Kuerti.

The Fine Arts Quartet has been in existence for 63 years. Even with changing personnel it has maintained extraordinary stability and continuity: Three of its four members have been with the quartet for more than 25 years. What is remarkable, and what was immediately evident in its opening Haydn, is that its level of vitality and its musical commitment have neither wavered nor grown stale. The performance was elegantly contained and sophisticated, but never effete. The opening movement, with its beautiful design, was absolutely clear, fresh and balanced. The andante was at once modest and rich, in the authentic Haydn way. The minuet was vigorous and humorous. Only the finale had perhaps not the true glinting elation.

The Bruckner *Quartet in C Minor* – the only such work the Austrian leviathan ever wrote – was the program's novelty. It is an extremely well-behaved piece composed as part of Anton Bruckner's academic studies for Otto Kitzler in 1861, in an earnest attempt to complete, at age 37, his musical education. The music of the quartet lies in the shadows of Haydn and Mendelssohn without attaining the vivacity of either. The andante has some brushings of Bruckner's later harmonic originality, but little else in the work achieves more than basic musicality, or even begins to foretell the achievements of the man who was to become one of the giants of late 19th-century choral and symphonic music. The Fine Arts Quartet played it as well as you will ever hear it.

The Shostakovich *Seventh Quartet*, Opus 108 is a sparkling little piece, its last three movements connected at the hip, its focus and momentum studded with surprises. Its sheer élan, as the Fine Arts played it, made it the perfect astringent before the sumptuous feast of the Schumann *Piano Quintet*.

Kuerti was at his marvellous best in this opulent Schumann, absolutely at one with the four strings who, in turn, luxuriated in having such a collaborator. The result was a performance utterly alive, perfect in its integrity, with each of its four movements fully characterized and luminous in the delicacy of its dynamic shadings and lyrical inspiration. I've never heard Kuerti more poised, more alert, more generously discreet, more completely in command of his superior gifts and great skill.

This was an experience to file in the memory as a new standard for performances of this great piece.