

Artist Management

Fry Street Quartet's Gallery Series concert sparkles in Mozart, Britten offerings

The utmost clarity of technical execution and emotional expression succinctly sums up the season's first of two Gallery Series concerts, which featured the Fry Street Quartet in four works, two apiece by Mozart and Britten.

Among the most impressive aspects was the outstanding balance of the four string voices, not an easy task in the G.W. Anderson Family Hall at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. Part of it perhaps was due to having a sold-out audience capacity. In addition, gallery visitors, especially on the second floor, mentioned how the sound filtered throughout the space, thus giving those who did not have tickets their own opportunity to enjoy the concert.

Barely two months into the season, Fry Street Quartet has proven its skills in smart thematic programming that NOVA's preceding music directors have demonstrated.

The two Mozart offerings represented the phenom in the 1780s, at the cusp of the

extraordinary burst of creativity that would mark the final years of his life. Meanwhile, the two Britten works came from the bookends of his own career: one, at the age of 20, and the other, the final work of his life, shortly before his death at the age of 63.

However, Fry Street Quartet finely juxtaposed the works in two halves that refocus our perspectives for appreciating the works of two composers who share more in terms of their creative expressionistic impulses than the separation of two centuries might indicate.

The first half conveyed the emotional, sobering wisdom of life, transformed by experience and accumulated knowledge. Mozart's *Adagio and Fugue in C minor, K. 546* arose out of practical considerations. Originally, the composer wrote the fugue for two pianos, but it was never performed publicly and then several years later in the period where he wrote new music at a torrid pace, he recast it for strings and added an opening adagio. The quartet expressed convincingly the

Artist Management

contrasts of the opening section with its grave, severe angular pulses and later softer lyrical textures. The most impressive part, though, came in the fugue, where each of the voices remained clear as ever, despite the growing thickness and density of the fugue. The reward is the thrilling unison chords at the end, of course in the base key of C minor.

Just as masterful was the rendering of Britten's *Third String Quartet* (1975). In the more than 43 years since his death, Britten's reputation has expanded significantly, just as Shostakovich's star perhaps has dimmed slightly while Bartók's has become more luminous. In this final work of Britten's life, the emotions are shaded in complex ways, sometimes seeming affirmed and satisfied and others wistful or even ambiguous about the approaching end of his life. The Fry Street Quartet produced a truly moving, often mesmerizing, tribute to this incredible piece.

The intriguing part of the second half was how the quartet reversed the conventional programming path. Normally, the concert opens on the brighter landscape to entice

and settle the listener into the challenges of absorbing more intense sonic experiences later in the program. Here, it was reversed and the second half sparkled.

After hearing a work composed during his period of debilitating illness, the joys of Britten's *Three Divertimenti* revealed the genius that already was apparent at the age of 20 when he composed these pieces. Charming, playful and technically exciting, the pieces make a convincing case for matching Britten's young genius capacities to that of Mozart, a composer whom he adored and considered seriously as a model to emulate. The Fry Street Quartet lifted this youthful work with astonishing authenticity of ebullience.

The closing work, Mozart's *String Quartet No. 14 in G major, K. 387* (also known as the *Spring Quartet*), showcased the ensemble's assiduousness for superb execution to magnify the contextual connection of this piece to Britten's *Three Divertimenti*. This was the first of the six Mozart string quartets written in honor of the older master of the form, Joseph Haydn. Of course, later Haydn string quartets would reflect the influence of

Artist Management

these works.

The *Spring Quartet* is a marvelous but difficult piece to achieve the right effect. The first movement starts out as clear and tightly knit as we have come to expect from Mozart but then, not so unexpectedly, he displays his breadth and depth of sophistication by loosening, even destabilizing, the music's internal structure. Later, the second Mozart fugue to appear in this program expounds on elements that make this one more

audacious and complex, especially as it seems unpredictable at times.

Nevertheless, this fugue is the opportunity to demonstrate Mozart's incredible musical logic in meshing Baroque and Classical sensibilities into one damn exhilarating finale. And, the Fry Street Quartet delivered the results with resounding impact in the venue.

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