

## **Parisi Quartet plays Beethoven**

By Marc Law, February 20, 2014

Yesterday evening I attended a performance of the venerable Parisii Quartet. Formed at the Paris Conservatoire in the early 1980s, **the Parisii are among the most sought after French string quartets on the North American and European concert circuit.** Last night's concert was the sixth and final installment of series of six concerts over the past two seasons featuring six different ensembles perform the complete cycle of Beethoven's sixteen string quartets. The performance took place at ArtsRiot, a newish venue in downtown Burlington, Vermont (the space was formerly a grocery store). I was at first skeptical that the hall would prove appropriate for chamber music; most musical performances at ArtsRiot feature popular bands (I am unaware of any previous classical music concert at ArtsRiot). However, it turns out that its dry acoustic and surprisingly intimate space work surprisingly well for chamber music.

On the program were three quartets spanning Beethoven's three compositional periods. The concert began with an "early period" quartet, the Quartet in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2, the so-called "Compliments" quartet, on account of its warm and welcoming opening violin motif; continued with the Quartet in E Flat Major, Op. 74, whose nickname, "The Harp," is derived from the pizzicato arpeggio that features throughout the opening movement; and concluded with the "late period" Quartet in B Flat Major, Op. 130 with the alternative, lighter finale that Beethoven composed just before he died, in place of his original concluding movement, the monumental and bizarre Grosse Fuge, which was published separately as his Op. 133.

These are all works that I know and love for more reasons that I can enumerate. Accordingly, let me highlight a few. For me, the Op. 18, No. 2, with its genial yet jocular melodies and rustic good humour, captures the best of early Beethoven: The influence of Haydn is apparent throughout but Beethoven's distinctive musical stamp is already in evidence. The Op. 74, set - in the sonorous key of E flat major, has that heroic quality that often characterizes Beethoven's middle period works. The coda of its first movement features one of the most spectacular violin virtuoso passages in the quartet literature. And its slow movement, in A flat major, reaches for the heavens, and, to some extent, presages the magnificent slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 127 quartet (a celestial theme and variations, also in A flat). Finally, the late period Op. 130 is a masterwork of motivic development, juxtaposing musical fragments and melodies from here and there, some truly strange (consider, for instance, the ominous opening bars, featuring all four instruments playing a descending motif in unison), some rustic (the Ländler-like fourth movement), others meandering (the andante third movement), and others simply playful (the lively finale). The emotional heart of the work (especially when the quartet is performed with the alternative finale in place of the Grosse Fuge), however, is the other-worldly fifth movement, the Cavatina, which is, at least in my estimation, the most sublime music ever written for four string instruments. I find it difficult to put into words why the Cavatina is so absolutely splendid. Perhaps it is because there is something about this movement that captures the essence of love, regret, vulnerability, loneliness, yet hope, in a profound and uniquely Beethovenian way, without the risk of ever being maudlin.

**The Parisii were in top form last night. While they are undoubtedly a technically**

**superb group, equal to any and all of the significant challenges posed by this music, what I enjoyed most was that this was not overtly showy performance. Unlike some younger ensembles that flaunt their technical prowess, the Parisiis play with an earnestness that brings a degree of sincerity and simplicity that is sometimes missing in more virtuosic renditions. This genuineness was apparent throughout-and perhaps may have been aided by the dry acoustic of the venue-but has the advantage of allowing the sweet, singing passages to be truly song like and the harsher moments to sound truly raw. I also appreciated the fact that while the Parisiis blend well together to produce a consistent sound, each player has his own unique style. Accordingly, the "conversational" aspects of these works (recall Goethe's description of a string quartet as "four rational people conversing") was also made clear, especially in the Op. 18, No. 2. However, for me, the high point of the evening was their playing of the Cavatina. I have attended several performances of the Op. 130, and it is without hesitation that I declare last night's version of the Cavatina to be among the most beautiful and ethereal I have ever heard. The Parisiis brought to this movement a sense of yearning, loss, and stillness that almost made my heart stop.**

**One has too few opportunities in this busy world to be so marvellously transported to another place. For many of us it is only through musical experiences like this that we glimpse the everelusive divine. I am grateful to the Parisiis for reminding me why I so love chamber music.**