

Concert review: Emotional fervour from Cecilia String Quartet and Georgy Tchaidze at Toronto Summer Music

By John Terauds on **August 1, 2012**

The Cecilia String Quartet performed for Toronto Summer Music at Walter Hall on Wednesday night (Liz Parker photo).

Chamber music concerts are so often seen as staid, serious events. But Wednesday night's Toronto Summer Music performance by Canada's Cecilia String Quartet and pianist Georgy Tchaidze at Walter Hall was pure excitement.

Their collaboration in Ernő Dohnányi's *Piano Quintet No. 1* was so engaged and moving that, ideally, the boisterously appreciative audience should have been given the opportunity to hear it again as an encore. Not that the rest of the programme, born within the orbit of the long-dissipated Austro-Hungarian Empire, didn't satisfy as well with its varied musical depictions of melodrama. But Dohnányi's youthful quintet, his official Opus 1, written in 1894 when he was 17, combines emotional effusion with close parallels to the solid, formal structures of Johannes Brahms, making for a piece that satisfies the mind as well as the soul. How many other pieces of music offer the joys of hearing eight fugal voices set within a dancelike

rhythm, as one does in the final movement of Dohnanyi's quintet?

The Cecilias — violinists Min-Jeong Koh and Sarah Nematallah, violist Caitlin Boyle and cellist Rachel Desoer — played as one with Tchaikovsky, becoming a single organism pulsing with red-blooded fervour. We have the Honens International Piano Competition and the Banff International String Quartet Competition, of which these performers are recent laureates, to thank for this inspired pairing of performers, meant to encourage creative collaborations.

Both the Cecilias and Tchaikovsky managed the elusive task of conveying barely-bridled emotion while maintaining minute control over balance, phrasing and pacing. It made for an interpretation that felt and sounded like the product of years of experience. The rest of the evening belonged to the talented quartet, the centrepiece being Leos Janáček's gripping, jagged, thoroughly unusual *String Quartet No. 1*, known as "The Kreutzer Sonata," written in 1923, when the composer was 69. The content, a musical distillation of Leo Tolstoy's suspenseful and tragic novella, is like a miniature version of one of Janáček's operas, alternating sweet romance with hair-raising outbursts of black passion.

The Cecilias paced the unfolding of jealousy and its deadly aftermath with a combination of sweet innocence, cool determination and fiery passion. Here is a young quartet that has clearly come of age. The opening pieces, six of the 12 *Cypresses* Antonin Dvorák arranged for string quartet in 1887, were rendered with a light touch, making the musical version of poet Gustav Pflieger-Moravsky's melodramatically

over-the-top texts much easier to take than the original songs. The live performance was every bit as engaging as the Cecilia's recently-released album of the full set, recorded at Koerner Hall.

Eschewing standard string quartet practice of performing without spoken introductions, the Cecílias provided explanations of the music they were about to play, which was a nice, informal change of pace. But hearing the texts of the original songs between each Cypress broke up these short pieces a bit too much. But that's only a quibble when the musicmaking is so magnetic.

Don't miss your next opportunity to hear these talented young performers in action.

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