

Review: Borodin Quartet and Georgy Tchaidze bring Russian mastery to classics

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Review: Honens Presents: Borodin Quartet and Georgy Tchaidze, piano at the Rozsa Centre at the University of Calgary on Saturday, March 30.

For its debut performance in Calgary, the famed Borodin Quartet was joined by Honens laureate Georgy Tchaidze. On the surface, at least, this was an instance of old Russia meeting new Russia. However, appearance can be deceiving, for although the pedigree of the Borodin quartet stretches back unbroken to the 1940s, the present make up of the quartet includes (unsurprisingly) no original members.

The present members of the quartet include youth and experience, with two senior and two junior players, if measured purely by age. All the members, however, are individually impressive in their professional accomplishments and to an astonishing degree continue the musical values and total sound that marked the quartet during the main years of its fame, when it recorded all the quartets of Beethoven and Shostakovich.

Compared to young North American quartets, whose playing often tends to sound the way high definition TV looks, the Borodin Quartet presents a very different tonal palate and approach to the making of music. Fundamentally, they do not play to the maximum dynamic at every opportunity; rather, they cultivate every possible shading of the sound in the medium soft to very soft range, something that encourages the listener to come to the music, instead of having the music forced down one's throat.

This approach, quite refreshing to my ears, eminently suited the Shostakovich Piano Quintet in G minor that occupied the second half of the program. A lyrical work in its overall stance, it received a mature, refined performance of great musical understanding, Shostakovich's unique musical language delivered idiomatically and quite naturally.

At the piano was the young Honens laureate Georgy Tchaidze, who as every Calgarian who attended the competition knows, has a crisp, non-nonsense way of playing that is always filled with interior energy and vitality. However, as well as he played to win the competition, I was unprepared to hear just how far he has matured in his artistry. I have heard this piece many times, but never with the piano part played with such brilliance and such imagination.

From the opening piano solo in the prelude, to the contrapuntal writing in the fugue, to the wispy textures of the insouciant finale, Tchaikovsky was magnificent, matching the experienced string players note for note to produce a performance of rare beauty and musical conviction.

The first half of the program was devoted to the middle of the three Razumovsky quartets by Beethoven, a minor-key grey pearl flanked by two more optimistic major-key companions. This is music that shows off what the Borodin quartet does best, the subtle harmonic shifts and textures beautifully rendered, with melody everywhere. This is, I suspect, the result of a group that has lived long with this music and has taken the trouble to penetrate its secrets. This was a deeply satisfying performance of this beautiful, inward music, giving ample testimony to why the Borodin Quartet continues to occupy the top rungs of the string quartet world.

It was a pleasure to welcome the group to Calgary; may they come again soon.

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