



Fire In The Hole!

Piccolo Spoleto's Spotlight Concert Series ended with quite a bang tonight! The Balkan String Quartet, a group of Serbian and, well, Balkan musicians currently based in Atlanta, graced the stage at New Tabernacle Fourth Baptist Church with their uncompromising fire and deliciously reckless approach. There were a few fairly troubling issues of intonation which seemed to mount as the first half of the program progressed, but after a short break the beast broke free, and we were treated to an electrifying mix of Balkan and Balkan-American music; raw with emotion, vivid in execution, and direct in intent.

Our quartet: Sinisa Ciric, violin, Mirna Ogrizovic-Ciric, violin, Danijela Zezelj-Gauldi, viola, and Martin Gueorguiev, cello, began with Alexander Glazunov's *Quartet "Slav,"* Op. 26. It begins *Moderato*, taken at a good clip, with a homey theme in the viola, giving us a chance to hear the wonderfully full and open sound Danijela draws forth from her instrument. Indeed, most of the phrases of this movement find their introduction in her beautifully capable hands. There is a sense of calm which rises through the relative quickness of this movement, and that juxtaposition became the spark which took its rather pastoral construction to a place of transcendence. They stopped to tune before the *Interludium*, and I wondered if anything could be amiss. All was well during the slowly rocking lilt of its opening, and as things picked up we got a true look at playing by the seat of one's pants! Some very subtle tuning issues cropped up, which they handled in progress, and the breathy ending gave us a warm sigh. *Alla Mazurka* danced its wild round, letting us know that BSQ is not afraid to make daring choices to increase a work's emotional impact, yet retain a sure sense of exactly why they do so. Unfortunately, intonation problems were no longer subtle. They stopped to tune again before the *Finale*, an ending of stately exuberance. I wondered how its more demure lines would fare when cast into the BSQ's passionate reading. Their sure sense of timing served it well, and the slower sections were lovely. But once again, something was awry in intonation land. I began to wonder: Does playing with this level of intensity doom one to such problems?

I need not have worried.

After a short break, BSQ returned and dove into some of the most passionate music I've heard in a good long while. Danijela told the audience that this music was "why we wanted to play," when they started out. Up first came Aleksandra Vrebalov's *Pannonia Boundless*, a dark, viscous, thoroughly thrilling piece based on the folk music of northern Serbia. Its crying laments were especially potent when traded between the viola and cello. Vrebalov is truly a composer of which to take note; after hearing this work, I want more! And when played with BSQ's organic sympathy, many in the audience (including your humble scribe...) began to melt.

And then, a world premiere! American composer Brian Mitchell, who was in attendance, created *Wishing, Wanting, Waiting* with Serbian folk music as his inspiration. It began with a quiet shimmering wash which slowly gave way to an ever increasing use of plucking by the whole quartet. When the ravishing (bowed now...) melody cropped back up, the light yet rhythmic cello line and various percussive effects cemented our relationship with this quartet. Wonderful!

Next up? Milos Simic's vibrantly racing crab walk, *Zikimo kolo*. It went by at such a blazing speed, I forgot to breath! But it also showed exactly how well our musicians communicate, even on the fly.

In *Hotland*, by Aleksandar Gajic's our cellist begins the piece by using his instrument as a drum, creating a base for its stark drones to build. The wonderful cry of its double stopped melody moved hypnotically through what amounted to two chords and the truth. A folk song in hyperspace? This work does exactly the same thing for Serbian folk what Led Zeppelin did for the blues.

Parts of the *Folk Suite*, a collaborative work by Milos Simic and Konstantin Blagojevic, with contributions and arrangement by our lead violinist, Sinisa Ciric, came next. It created a wedge of ever increasing speed. Watching Martin speed up its walking bass of a cello line was fascinating! When it reached full frenzy, it stopped on a dime. Thrilling!

"*Souvenir*" from *The Marinko's Pond*, another piece by Mr. Gajic ended the program proper with a melody that begged to be played over and over again, lending itself to infinite variations and an improvisatory character. Before the last notes had died away, the audience was on their feet cheering!

And we got an encore! The closing movement from the *Folk Suite*, a complex rhythmic workout which came crashing to a halt filled with joy.

Early intonation problems aside, BSQ played superbly. What's possibly more exciting is how they created a binding rapport with the audience within such a short time. We'll be hearing more from them!

By Robert Bondurant