

Arianna String Quartet

By Michael Huebner

The Arianna String Quartet is an exemplary model for 21st-century string quartets. A full-time university residency allows it to spread its musical message far beyond its home base of St. Louis — in their case, to five continents. Its numerous education and outreach programs help ensure the progress and continuity of the art form. Recordings and festivals further heighten its visibility.

But the most apparent manifestations of such an endeavor come down to live musical performance, as Arianna revealed Thursday in Brock Recital Hall in a concert jointly presented by the Birmingham Chamber Music Society, Davis Architects Guest Artist Series and Ted Haddin. An engaging, balanced program, coupled with playing that in many ways rivaled the world's finest quartets, made this a memorable experience. It included Beethoven, an almost obligatory benchmark for quartets, together with a 2007 quartet by St. Louis native and Pulitzer Prize winning composer Kevin Puts, and Schumann's piano quintet.

Puts's "Credo" immediately establishes an open tonal landscape, a minimalist atmosphere occasionally interrupted by stray dissonances but remaining ever grounded. Its extramusical narratives — a stringed instrument workshop, cityscapes in Pittsburgh and New York — aren't readily apparent without the aid of program notes, but the work stands vividly on its own. Arianna is clearly enamored with this Americana tableau, its heartfelt melodic exchanges, furious outbursts, and plaintive solos ensuring its place in the repertoire.

Beethoven's String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3, the third of the Razumovsky quartets, defined Arianna's sound — scrupulously blended yet sharply transparent,



with an easy fluidity. It allows each player to emerge as a soloist (they are all established as such) or merge seamlessly into the whole. The opening *Allegro vivace* was taken at a fast clip, which produced a few minor technical glitches in scale passages, but on the whole the movement was filled with tension and anticipation. That segued nicely to the slow second movement, which honed in on the depth of cellist Kurt Baldwin and violinist Joanna Mendoza.

In the *Menuetto*, scales intersected and criss-crossed with ease and clarity. In the finale, the quartet exceeded its *Allegro molto* marking. Exaggerated accents and imitative entries were negotiated with blazing speed and precision, violinists John McGrosso and Julia Sakharova matching Baldwin and Mendoza in each phrase.

For Schumann's Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 114, the quartet was joined by the Israeli pianist Einav Yarden, whose chamber music sensibilities fit the quartet's like a glove. The thick-textured opener vacillated between power and lyricism, the *Scherzo* by sweeping scales. Yarden clearly led the way in defining the work's dynamic shifts in the final *Allegro*, leading the quintet to a brilliant conclusion.

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John McGrosso, violin
Julia Sakharova, violin
Joanna Mendoza, viola
Kurt Baldwin, cello

Brock Recital Hall
Thursday, Oct. 29, 2015
Presented by Birmingham Chamber Music Society,
Davis Architects Guest Artist Series and Ted Haddin