

Pacifica String Quartet Gives Awe-Inspiring 'Big Game' Alternative

By Michael Heubner

There was at least one alternative to the big game on Sunday afternoon, besides Animal Planet's "Puppy Bowl," that is.

The Pacifica String Quartet, which filled in the last minute with a thrilling concert here in 2006, gave an awe-inspiring performance in Reynolds-Kirschbaum Recital Hall that showcased the

ensemble's individual talents, homogeneous blend and penetrating insight into Beethoven, Shostakovich and Schubert.

Of the ensemble's three offerings, Beethoven's Quartet in F, Op. 18, No. 1, was the one most grounded in classicism, but the Pacifica didn't treat it that way. Bold and aggressive, this reading had an energy that surged and subsided, periods of repose often bursting into passion. Quick scale runs were meticulously calculated and executed, melding seamlessly from one instrument to the next. Each detail, down to the dampening of resonating strings and the spare use of vibrato, played out with deft precision.

First violinist Simin Ganatra's rich sound was pervasive yet never overbearing, and her leadership was clear in the Beethoven and Schubert. Shostakovich's String Quartet No.



11 was suitably more egalitarian and introspective. Pacifica is currently in the throes of Shostakovich -- they will complete the cycle of 15 quartets later this month in Chicago -- and this performance was spellbinding. Its seven movements veer in as many different directions. The stark introduction leads to a light scherzo, followed by clashes of dissonance.

While not exactly easy listening, the ensemble made this meaty work highly palatable with its quick, searching scales in the Etude and biting octaves in the viola and cello in the Elegy.

If the Shostakovich made listeners sit up and take notice, Schubert's Quartet in D minor ("Death and the Maiden") brought them to the edge of their chairs. The drama was palpable as the quartet became fully immersed in the physicality of the Allegro, the gentle lyricism of the Andante variations and the buoyancy of the Scherzo. The Presto was bright and vibrant, a final flurry bringing the audience to its feet.

For an encore, the quartet performed the Allegretto Pizzicato from Bartok's Quartet No. 4, its plucks, snaps and strums providing a lighthearted close.

Pacifica String Quartet

Simin Ganatra and Sibbi Berhardsson,
violinists; Masumi Per Rostad, violist;
Brandon Vamos, cellist

☆☆☆☆☆

Alys Stephens Center
Sunday

Presented by Birmingham Chamber Music Society