Berkshire Review for the Arts

Public Concerts Resume at PS21 in Chatham, New York—Second Concert: Beethoven by the Calidore String Quartet

Michael Miller

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Calidore String Quartet. Photo: Marco Borggreve.

PS21, Chatham, New York
July 24, 6 PM and 8 PM. Two one-hour concerts.
Calidore String Quartet
Jeffrey Myers, Ryan Meehan, Violins
Jeremy Berry, Viola
Estelle Choi, Cello

Program I:
Beethoven – String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130, with “Grosse Fugue” Op. 133, with the published last movement played after a pause

Program II:
Beethoven – String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5
String Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135

PS21 was founded by the late Judy Grunberg in 1999 with the mission of presenting advanced and diverse performances of music, dance, and theater, as well as some film screenings. Under her leadership as President of the Board, local residents and some from further away enjoyed lively summer programs performed in an ingenious plastic stage-cum-shelter in the middle of a field. Before her passing in 2019, she initiated the construction of an equally ingenious and certainly more elegant permanent structure which could be used from autumn through spring. A 300-seat theater open on three sides functions as the summer venue. Its stage house can be converted into a black box theater seating 99, providing a more
intimate space for performances that need it. It was designed by a local architect, Evan Stoller, son of the legendary architectural photographer, Ezra Stoller.

A year ago, Elena Siyanko arrived as Executive Director and created an ambitious program involving an impressive international roster of artists performing challenging new works along with a discerning selection of classics. This heightening of PS21’s already creative programming, scheduled to begin in March 2020, was more than welcome, given the bland offerings of some other summer festivals in the area. This plan unfortunately became unfeasible with the Covid-19 pandemic, but Ms. Siyanko deftly substituted a program of US-based artists (another group PS21 is pledged to support) for amid-July start-up, and further enhanced PS21’s reputation of innovation by offering the first officially approved series of socially-isolated live performances in the Northeast, as far as I am aware. With the necessary safety guidelines in place, the larger semi-open space can accommodate a limited audience for an exciting series of performances which will extend at least through August, the rate of infections permitting. See below for the schedule.
An especially profound group event marked—somewhat unexpectedly—the beginning of my own experience of the pandemic, immediately following what I thought would be a briefer transference from Manhattan to North Adams: a probing Shakespeare workshop at Shakespeare and Company led by founding member, Kevin Coleman. Unsettled, some perhaps frightened by the immanence of as yet unknown changes of life, we approached Shakespeare and each other from the brink. It would be comforting to think of this evening, deepened by some of the greatest music ever written, as a marker of an end, but the end is nowhere in sight—we should all realize that—even if we can now gather in a collective space to hear a live performance. There is no reason, above all in the United States, to believe that the masks, the distancing, and other precautions will go away anytime soon, and we must learn to accept the rather somber status quo for what it is.

This all-Beethoven evening, a welcome resumption of the interrupted celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the composer’s birth. (Not to worry...the bicentenary of his death looms for 2027!) Even if this had turned out to be the busy Beethoven year that many institutions had planned, this event would have stood out. The Calidore Quartet, founded ten years ago at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, balanced
the technical demands and humane adventures of these masterpieces more completely than any contemporary string quartet I have heard, as impressive as the plentiful crop of such groups as we have today is.

The division of what would have been a normal two-hour program into two halves, presumably to give as many people as possible the opportunity to enjoy this now rare pleasure of hearing a live musical performance, seemed also an effective strategy in approaching Beethoven’s late quartets, especially Op. 130, which, especially when played with its original finale, the Große Fuge, as is common today, is enormous. The others, including the deceptively light and cheerful Op. 135, which filled most of the second concert, require immense concentration from the musicians and close listening from the audience. So in this case it makes sense to devote all or most of an hour-long concert to a single work. I was happy to spend the intervening hour chatting with friends and strolling around PS21’s beautiful grounds and then starting all over again.

The five late quartets were Beethoven’s last major effort before his death. He was set off on it by commission initiated in 1822 by one of his favored patrons, Prince Galitzin, who was an accomplished
musician, an intelligent and passionate admirer, and an effective supporter—although an unreliable payer—who arranged for a performance of the Missa Solemnis in St. Petersburg in 1824 and was rewarded with the dedication of Beethoven’s most splendid occasional work, “The Consecration of the House” Overture, Op. 124, in 1825. Op. 127 in E Flat Major, 130 in B Flat Major, and 132 in A Minor, were the result, followed by two more quartets, Op. 131 in C-sharp Minor and 135 in F Major, written without commission. (All this amidst the worst of his painful relationship with his nephew and ward, Karl, and severe bouts of sickness, which would lead soon enough to his death.) The only music he completed after that was the briefer substitution for the Große Fuge requested by his publisher, who published the fugue separately as Op. 133.

The mystification and intimidation of the publisher and first audience has prevailed until quite recently, when the phenomenally trained younger generation of musicians began to stray from the published version with its more accessible finale to Beethoven’s original. Even the great string quartets of the earlier 20th century, performing the Große Fuge on its own, showed strain in playing it, and the movement was known to audiences as well or even better in
transcriptions for string orchestra, which was long thought to be more equal to the formidable demands of Beethoven’s writing.

Calidore’s performance of Op. 130 was astonishing for the technical mastery which enabled them to play all of it, even the fugue, smoothly, with polish and beautiful tone, and no sign of effort. This command enabled them to convey the deeply moving humane content of Beethoven’s music with supreme economy and no trace of undue emphasis or expressiveness. Their reading was cohesive from beginning to end, through the four brief movements between the first movement and the finale. Both the discipline and the coherence recall for me the mastery of the Tokyo Quartet, with a more open warmth of their own. The published finale followed the enthusiastic applause accorded the quartet, as if it were an encore. This separation made it possible to appreciate the movement in itself. Without that, it would have seemed superfluous and distracting after the tremendous journey through the Große Fuge. The publisher’s finale, as the Calidore Quartet played it, seemed by no means slight or dwarfed by its predecessor, but a rich and satisfying conclusion of its own kind. In the last movement of his career and life,
a compromise to satisfy his publisher, Beethoven was above placating him with a cynical placebo, but gave it his best effort. Op. 130 speaks to us both ways.

An hour later the quartet took a firm footing in the Beethoven of the late 1790s, still within the ambit of his teacher, Haydn, and within the confines of the fashionable salon, but pushing the envelope in the youthful expanse of his gesture in the String Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No, 5. The more conventional and clearly-defined classical forms felt reassuring and solid in the Calidore’s playing, especially the third-movement variations. Continuing their robust breed of understatement, they brought the finale to its conclusion without anything more obvious than the full consciousness that it was the final cadence.

In Op. 135, the last full work Beethoven composed, as his illness grew worse and worse, but still not bad enough to convince him that it was truly to be his last, he returned to the humorous mode of the judiciously chosen quartet from Op. 18, and of Haydn and Mozart before it, all centered around one of his most singing and touching slow movements, played with moving straightforwardness and simplicity by the Calidore, leading into the mock-drama of the musical quandary that begins the joyous final movement: “Muß es sein?” “Es muß sein!” The quartet’s technical mastery and
solid interpretative grounding served the this subtle work well, one which doesn’t wear everything on its sleeve. Avoiding the temptation to over-inflect Beethoven’s seemingly mercurial writing, they chose the path of robust, if polished, high spirits.

What more appropriate and rewarding music for the uninterrupted—one hopes—return of live music to our region, especially in performances of this stature? One added factor behind the Calidore Quartet’s extraordinary achievement in plumbing the spiritual and emotional depths of the late quartets emerges from their experience of the pandemic. After their share of cancellations and other frustrations, they have spent the past month in quarantine together, essentially living together, rehearsing this program, which they are, as second violinist Ryan Meehan said, grateful to be playing before an audience. This intensive collaboration bore rich fruit in their highly disciplined, but heartfelt playing.

I have only one further comment to add. PS21 chose to pass the music through their elaborate audio system, which, obviously a new and sophisticated setup, sounded as accurate as these devices can be, but the speakers were audible nonetheless. This is my first musical experience with the new venue, and I have no
idea of whatever acoustical problems may exist in the semi-open space, but surely a string quartet can make itself heard in a 300-seat hall.

Future Concerts

John Luther Adams’s Ten Thousand Birds performed by Alarm Will Sound

August 7 at 4 PM ON SITE

The highlight of PS21’s summer season will be the New York State premiere of Grammy Award-winning composer John Luther Adams’ Ten Thousand Birds, which will be performed by the acclaimed Alarm Will Sound ensemble at PS21. Drawing inspiration from birdsong, the piece explores the connection between nature and music—a topic Adams has continually explored throughout his career.

A free community program called “Follow Me Into the Field.” will take place on Thursday, August 6. Led by Alarm Will Sound musicians, families will take a socially distanced musical tour of the PS21/Crellin Park landscape. Through the voyage, instrumental sounds will come mingle with the calls of wildlife, rustling leaves, and human footfalls. As in John Luther
Adams’s composition, birdsong becomes music, instrumental sounds transmute into natural ones, and the open setting becomes artistic space, where the lines blur between human creativity and natural phenomena.

**Modern Music Fest** concert schedule:

**August 15: Conor Hanick.** Ustvolskaya: *Piano Sonatas No. 4, 5, and 6.*

**August 21. Timo Andres.** Copland: *Piano Sonata*; Rzewski: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*; Timo Andres: *Old Ground*

**August 22. Adam Tendler,** piano
John Cage: Cheap Imitation, Part I (5m)
Christopher Cerrone: Hoyt-Schermerhorn (8m)
Meredith Monk: Ellis Island (3m)
Nico Muhly: Off the Grid / A Hudson Cycle (5m)
Frederic Rzewski: Coming Together (19m)
Philip Glass: Mad Rush (14m)

**August 28, Miranda Cuckson,** violin
Bach: Sonata No. 2 in A minor (25m)
Cage: 59 1/2” (1m)
Davidovsky: Synchronisms No. 9 for violin and electronic sounds (9m)
Pierre Boulez: Anthemes I (9m)
Other artists: TBD

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