

Stradivari Quartet delivers fearless performance at Flagler Museum

By **MÁRCIO BEZERRA**

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No other instrument maker has achieved the fame and, arguably, the level of excellence of Antonio Stradivari. Even though his string instruments have undergone some modernization (including replaced necks, fingerboards and bridges, among other parts), the bodies of his 17th century instruments are capable of delivering a remarkably consistent beautiful and powerful tone.

While more than 600 Stradivari remain in use, it is a rare occasion to hear one at a concert. To hear four such instruments in one evening is, for most people, an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

That opportunity happened Tuesday at the Flagler Museum Music Series, which featured, in its third concert, the aptly named Stradivari Quartet.

Consisting of four young musicians performing on instruments from the Swiss Stradivari Foundation, Habisreutinger, the ensemble fulfilled the high expectations set by the allure of the instruments by performing a superbly demanding concert.

The program started with Franz Schubert's String Quartet in G Minor, D. 173. An early work, its melodic lines and pathos are remarkable for an 18-year-old composer.

From the opening bars, one could appreciate the beautiful tone coming from the four Stradivari. Indeed, if most ensembles sound powerful thanks to the particular acoustics of Whitehall, the Stradivari Quartet's fullness sounded more refined, with a myriad of different colors being heard every turn of phrase. For sure, some of that effect had to do with the instruments, but most of the praise should go to the ensemble's members, who, despite their youth and humble demeanor, proved to be superb musicians.

After the Schubert, they shared the stories and legends behind each instrument. The viola, for instance, had been heard by Johannes Brahms in the first performance of his String Quartet in A minor, Op. 51, No. 2, which suitably closed the Flagler program.

A rather tortuous piece, the quartet is not as successful as Brahms' piano quartets or string sextets. The lack of contrast among its middle movements is to be blamed, as well as Brahms' penchant for overworking melodic lines into a counterpoint that sounds too "learned" at times.

Still, the Stradivari Quartet negotiated its many intricacies (especially the treacherous voicing of many passages) with ease. Once again, the musicians projected a most beautiful sound.

But it was in Béla Bartók's String Quartet No. 4 that the ensemble showed its full potential. A masterpiece of the 20th century, this is a work of highest technical and musical demands. Bartók's use of dissonance to such an expressive effect is remarkable, as well as his ability to engage the audiences through the many special effects, such as the snap — also called Bartók's — pizzicato and allusions to Eastern European folk idioms.

The ensemble tackled the piece fearlessly, delivering a commanding rendition and making a strong case for the often neglected chamber music of the past century.

It was a remarkable concert in a remarkable season that has been characterized by an array of high-quality, less-performed works in all venues so far covered. One hopes that this is a sign of how mature our musical life has become.

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