

Arts Pages

With an intimidating level of perfection **The Canadian Cecilia String Quartet at the *Konzerthaus* Concert Hall**

BY MARTIN WILKENING

Music competitions have their own laws. Just as the winners can never be truly bad, there could be gems amongst the runners-up who will shine in their musical careers at a later date. The International String Quartet Competition in Banff is considered one of the toughest of its kind, and most of the 10 finalists that meet in Canada are younger ensembles that are already veterans of several other competitions and have considerable concert experience. The competition takes place every three years, and in the 30 years since its inception, no German quartet has ever won. However, the Hagen, Kuss or Mandelring quartets, respectively, have been amongst the front runners, and some of the first prize winners ended up being less well-known than the aforementioned groups.

Last fall, the Asasello Quartet and the Amaryllis Quartet from Germany were invited to participate. Alas, they did not prevail. The crown was given to four young musicians from Canada, the Cecilia String Quartet. The prize includes a tour mainly through the Netherlands and Germany, which, in addition to small-town venues, also includes concert halls such as the *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam and the Berlin *Konzerthaus*, whose string quartet series with its international guest performers allows for a look beyond the city's quartet scene.

The fact that the *Konzerthaus*' artistic directors put the very existence of this series in question touches not only the core of the definition of music itself, but appears particularly absurd at a time when there are more exceptional young string quartets than ever before. They do have an audience, too, even though the numbers of occupied seats in the concert halls leave something to be desired. Nevertheless, the small hall where the newcomers from Canada played was reasonably well occupied even though a competing quartet was playing that same night in the philharmonic chamber music hall.

Controlling bizarre jumps

The Cecilia String Quartet opened with Haydn's quartet in G minor from op. 20, the most mysterious but also most eccentric piece of the series. Astounding was the musicians' extreme control of all bizarre mental leaps and insertions dreamed up by Haydn's imagination. Enchanting was the sensibility towards the sound, the transitions between melodic and harmonics, which ensured that the relationship between the four instruments unfolded to reveal acute presence at all times. Amazing was also the mastery that balanced each individual detail against the general rhythmic flow. Also in terms of tonal quality, mostly devoid of vibrato and yet intensive, the balance between expressiveness and

interplay was almost dauntingly perfect, and the beauty of the tone in the plaintive melodic magic of the slow movement was simply unbeatable.

Maybe some elements, in their Cecilian purity, came across as somewhat over-studied and slightly anaemic. Dvorak's quartet in G major, op. 106, was missing temperament and freedom of play. However, the Cecilia String Quartet's smoother middle instruments are complemented by an extremely versatile first violinist and a fantastic cellist, who manages to infuse her sound with gnarled elements and manages to keep the tension and movement going even in simple alternating bass patterns, sound repetitions and at the pianissimo level. The new piece "Commedia dell'arte", commissioned for the Banff competition from Ana Sokolovic, a native of Serbia now living in Canada, seemed somewhat jejune in the extra-musical motivation of its effects. However, one could well imagine how this piece must have helped to separate merely caricaturizing interpretations from those played with integrative power, as expressed by the Cecilia String Quartet.