

Edmonton (April 1, 2017) —The New Orford String Quartet and Friends: Impressions of Ravel, Debussy and Chausson

by Morgan Luethe

The playing of the New Orford String Quartet, at their April 1st appearance in Edmonton, had a palpable energy no doubt inspired by fresh news of the group's Juno win for their gripping account of the Brahms Op. 51 quartets, recorded last year for the Bridge label. Appearing with guests Orion Weiss (piano) and Cho-Liang Lin (violin), the evening's program plotted the trajectory of French music from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, tracing its development out of the formal and harmonic tensions of post-romanticism, to the sparse and sometimes jarring textures of modernism.

The first of the evening's performances featured Lin and Weiss in the G Major *Violin Sonata* of Ravel, a work written as much *against* the concept of a duo for violin and piano, as *for* it; notably, it was this composer's intention to expose, in the sparse and somewhat bleak texture of the work, what he saw as being the inherent weaknesses in an essentially incompatible pairing of instruments.

The opening *Allegretto* artfully demonstrates Ravel's point through seeming mutual aloofness of the two parts; throughout the movement it sounds as if both players are holding separate conversations in the same room, and that only intermittently seem to align. The sultry middle movement, titled *Blues*, uses grinding bitonality (the piano playing in the key of A flat, the violin in G) to emphasize the tension between the two instruments and anticipates, stylistically, the music Ravel was to encounter on his 1928 North American tour, on which he heard Duke Ellington's music at the Cotton Club in Harlem, and was brought into the orbit of the young George Gershwin. The short, grotesque *Perpetuum mobile* finale brings the work to a frantic and energetic close and was thrillingly brought off by the duo of Lin and Weiss.

The 1927 *Violin Sonata* inhabits a world far different from Ravel's prewar work; the vibrancy and exuberance that characterize *Daphnis et Chloé* and the F Major *String Quartet* are absent in this later work. The *Sonata* is the work of Ravel the War Veteran, and the despondency and melancholy that pervades the writing must have been, to some degree, the result of his traumatic years of service on the brutal Western Front.

Next, the New Orford came out to present the fragrant and seductive *String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10*, of Debussy. To this famous work, the group brought playing of intensity and assuredness. From the frank texture of its opening statement to the seductive Russian influenced melody of its radiant slow movement, it's clear that the work is meant to showcase the full creative and expressive range of its genius young composer.

Debussy's *String Quartet* marks an important point in the development of French music. After a significant period of artistic struggle among French musicians to formulate a musical identity independent of the behemoth influence of Richard Wagner, it was the young, rebellious musicians of Debussy's generation, who enthusiastically turned to the harmonically and stylistically defiant works of the Russian nationalists like Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov, that were to break free of German-dominated romanticism and write the first "impressionistic"

music. The Debussy *Quartet* is one of the first confident statements in this newly developing, exotic musical language.

The New Orford gave a memorable performance of this work. Where appropriate, their interpretation was terse without being heavy and, in other places, was light and witty without being flippant. Impressionistic music, especially that of Debussy is music of subtlety; its textures are intentionally blurred and its dynamics and harmony are always carefully and precisely shaded.

It was all hands-on instruments for the final offering of the evening: Chausson's *Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet*, Op. 21. Chronologically the earliest composed of the works programmed, the piece carried the traits of the identity crisis that afflicted French music of the time. Premiered in 1892, the year before Debussy was to write the *String Quartet*, this work bares a stylistic uncertainty that attempts to reconcile thick Germanic textures, with the alluringly chromatic harmonies that would eventually form the musical language of the Impressionists. Though the composition itself seemed overly drawn-out and searching in some sections, perhaps lacking the conviction and directness of the Debussy or Ravel works, it also featured inspired passages anticipatory of the work of the two latter composers.

Soloists Lin and Weiss performed beautifully against the warm and nuanced background of the New Orford. The players gave a convincing performance that reflected their deep understanding and appreciation for this music, and they should be commended for bringing Chausson's unique and fertile work to the public.

Robertson Wesley United Church was once again filled with great music and grateful listeners. A lucky audience were we to have these freshly gilded Juno winners give their first post-award concert in our city. Orion Weiss and Cho-Liang Lin played with great sensitivity and devotion throughout the evening, and both were memorable in their roles as collaborators with each other and with the quartet. Congratulations go out to the New Orford String Quartet not only for their well-deserved Juno win, but for doing an admirable job in ensuring the relevance and longevity of chamber music in Canada up to now, and hopefully for many years to come.