

## The 2017 Summer Solstice Music Festival: The Attacca Quartet (June 22, 23)

by Morgan Luethe

*For the 10<sup>th</sup> year running, ECMS presented its week-long Summer Solstice Music Festival to grateful audiences in venues throughout Edmonton. This year's edition of the festival brought a diverse roster of international performers to our city for a series of concerts populated with equally diverse musical offerings. Over the course of events, audiences were treated to world-class performances set an eclectic and interesting range of performance-spaces that included the University of Alberta's Convocation Hall, downtown's Yellowhead Brewery, CBC Edmonton's Centre Stage at City Centre Mall, and the Art Gallery of Alberta.*

The New York-based Attacca Quartet was a welcome feature of the festival's 2017 line-up, both in the palpable energy and seriousness of the group's performances of new music as well as in their de-facto ambassadorial role as young, up-and-coming faces in the world of chamber music and classical music, broadly. It is as highly effective advocates of chamber music, both new and old, that the Attacca Quartet are already having a significant impact on their musical world.

The Edmonton audience's first encounter with this dynamic group took place in the always inviting, relaxed atmosphere of the Yellowhead Brewery. Here, members of the quartet struck a casual, comfortable tone that fit well with both ambiance of the venue and the mood of the audience. The group's choice of almost- exclusively new repertoire for the evening's programme seems to have also reflected this more open, informal setting. This is not to say, however, that the music they presented was played without dedication and seriousness. Throughout the course of the evening's music, the Attacca Quartet passionately advocated for the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw and gave gripping performances of her *Valencia*, alongside works composed by members of the quartet, themselves.

The following evening saw both the Attacca Quartet and the audience transported to the more conventional concert setting of Convocation Hall, on the University of Alberta campus. The musical offerings for this venue, likewise, largely reflected this shift in atmosphere as the group presented a programme featuring more conventional string quartet fare that included the unmatched Op. 131 quartet of Beethoven, and the early A minor quartet of a 14-year-old Felix Mendelssohn.

First however, the group gave an exciting reading of Canadian composer Kelly-Marie Murphy's *Dark Energy*. So often when an audience sees the unfamiliar work of a contemporary composer, their aural guard goes up and their interest decreases; the presentation of new music becomes akin to taking one's vitamins. As audiences change, though, I think this initial reaction will as well; after all, the works of the great masters were *all*, at some point, considered "contemporary music." The Attacca Quartet should be commended for their passionate advocacy of new music. As audiences, we should approach the new works of our own living composers with enthusiasm and interest, and applaud them with the vigor and gratefulness as the audience did so warmly at Convocation Hall.

In characteristic Mendelssohnian fashion the A minor quartet, the work of a *teenager*, came off with caprice, beauty, and remarkable emotional depth all in appropriate portion. So much of Mendelssohn's music (and his chamber music especially) bares an unassailable quality of workmanship and balanced restraint. He is not out to make the seismic, existential statements that occur and recur with such hard-

won perfection and pronunciation as in the late quartets of Beethoven; it is not in these ways that Mendelssohn's music lays claim to greatness. Rather, it is in the evident mastery of compositional form and proportion, along with that unmistakable Mendelssohnian charm, that this music leaves a lasting impression on the listener.

Closing the programme was the original "contemporary music". The C-sharp minor quartet of Beethoven (1826), a personal favourite of the composer himself, stood as the towering centerpiece of the night's programme. The unusual seven-movement structure of the work requires that each portion of the work be played *attacca*, without a break, resulting in a powerful, cyclical artistic statement of fantastic emotional tension and philosophic profundity. This uncompromising, erratic work, while now widely recognized as the greatest string quartet ever written, was in its day taken for confirmation of Beethoven's final descent into madness. Could that have been partly the case? Perhaps. However, it is in the world's eventual recognition of the complete *transcendence* of what is possibly Beethoven's most personal, unflinching music that the Op.131 quartet can rightly take its place among the great statements across all arts.

The Attacca Quartet are a group with an already impressive resume, a glowing future. In all their performances their complete interconnectedness as a quartet, as well as their consummate professionalism as individual artists was apparent. Their appearances in Edmonton were an inspiring injection of youth and energy and no doubt assured audiences of a bright future for this type of world-class music making, especially with musicians like this at the fore.