

A look-back at the Summer Solstice Festival 2016

June was brought to a satisfying end in Edmonton this summer, as the annual Summer Solstice Music Festival rounded out yet another program of fine music making. Featuring some of the most gifted names in the world of chamber music (notably The Fine Arts Quartet, cellist Matt Haimovitz, and acclaimed pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin), the 2016 edition of the festival offered a series of intriguing concerts presented by some of the most well-known names in the business. Set against the backdrop of some of our city's best concert spaces, performances ranged in conception from mammoth presentations of the great masterworks of the chamber repertoire to more intimate recital gatherings which had an almost casual tone. In the end, this was a combination of both musical and artistic variety, coupled with various changes of setting that were to contribute to some of the festival high points that follow below.

The opening night of the festival, set in the impressive interior of our downtown All Saints' Anglican Cathedral and Edmonton's own Patricia Tao, joined by notable violinist Gil Sharon, brought off a well-tailored, succinct performance of a stoic and arresting masterpiece. In the K.304 Violin Sonata, Mozart marvellously balances sublime classical poise with the impassioned "*Sturm und Drang*" intensity which had become so fashionable in German-speaking Europe at that time. The concert also featured the first ever published work of the young Beethoven, for which Calgary cellist Rafael Hoekman join the duo of Tao and Sharon on stage. From the outset of this piece, it is clear that the Op.1, Nr.1 Piano Trio is the work of a young man determined to go places, characterized by good-natured, humorous music that seems as if it can barely contain its own excitement. This is the work of a youthful, largely untroubled musical genius - before the famous deafness was to transform him into the figure of the tortured romantic demigod as he is known today. For listeners, though, it is important to be exposed to such a thing as "carefree" Beethoven once in a while.

Wednesday night belonged to the headlining Fine Arts Quartet who, in the concert's second half, joined forces with celebrated cellist (and Deutsche Gramophone artist) Matt Haimovitz. The group first presented the hearty Op. 71, Nr. 2 quartet of Haydn, a lighthearted and masterful work dosed with the

good-natured humour especially characteristic of the master's work in this medium. As counterbalance to the Haydn, the players of the Fine Arts next gave a gripping rendition of the seventh Shostakovich quartet which, in contrast to the unrestrained musical joking of the previous work, communicated biting sarcasm set amidst an evidently deep artistic struggle for genuine creation under the scrutinizing eyes of the Soviet censors. Though probably the most musically foreign-sounding piece of the program, the Shostakovich quartet was the only one I listened to again that night at home.

Of course, the high point of the evening came as the Quartet welcomed an unassuming Haimovitz to the stage for the unequalled Schubert quintet. What a gift to the audience it was to hear such a group of world-class, world-renowned performers give a reading of what is likely the greatest work in the chamber repertoire. Certainly a testament to each of the performers' consummate musicianship was their admirable ability to hold the crowd's attention throughout a work of such "heavenly length" and musical magnitude. Amidst the thunderous (and rightly so) applause that followed the performance I found myself wondering: had poor Schubert lived to hear his staggering creation performed in his lifetime, would he have ever expected his work, in future generations, to be taken up and played so lovingly by some of the world's best-regarded musicians?

The Fine Arts Quartet returned to All Saints' Anglican Cathedral to round out the work week with a tantalizing programme of French music. The short but highly charged string quartet of Germaine Tailleferre opened the evening. I admit that I'd only become aware of this work and its composer after I'd seen the festival schedule but I certainly was impressed at the distinct originality of Tailleferre's music. Even set against the famous Ravel quartet which followed, Tailleferre's miniature essay in the genre, though undeniably influenced by the style of her older male colleague, stood out as an attractive chamber work marked by a unique style.

The players of the Fine Arts gave a rendition of the shimmering Ravel quartet next. This work, especially dear to me, was something I'd been looking forward to hearing all week. With its exquisite musical textures and perfumed impressionistic tonal palette, the Ravel quartet is an excellent

representation of the perfection and extremely delicate compositional calculation characteristic of its composer's entire output. Renowned as *the* master of orchestration (which, by the way, he *was*), it was remarkable to see how Ravel, even when given only the forces of four string players could erect a work of such textural sensitivity and colour.

Charles Richard-Hamelin, silver medalist at the 2015 International Chopin Piano Competition, gave a masterful Sunday evening recital, once again, in the acoustically generous All Saints'. In a program which featured a lot of familiar fare, there were also encounters with lesser-known works to enjoy. The underplayed Op. 10 Piano Suite of George Enescu balanced two early Beethoven rondos in the concert's first half; hats should be tipped to Hamelin for such a sensitive and assured performance of such an unfamiliar though thoroughly attractive work - his playing demonstrated a clear and deep understanding of a much overlooked post-romantic composer, and he advocated well on behalf of this piece. The last half of Hamelin's concert featured the composer on which he's built his reputation as a pianist - Chopin. His thoughtful interpretation of the Op. 47 Ballade along with his subtle and silky interpretation of the Op. 58 Piano Sonata shone as testament to his abilities not only as a real Chopin specialist, but also as a performer of considerable musical force.

Over the course of the week, audiences experienced a wide range of chamber music played in a variety of effective venues; both the large hall of All Saints' as well as the venerable space at Convocation Hall lent radiant acoustics to concerts, just as the Yellowhead Brewery proved an attractive stage for more intimate performances. The Summer Solstice Festival once again pulled off a week of engaging artists playing the music most dear to them and this was by no means lost on audiences. Generous applause was characteristic of every performance and served as a testament to the level of cultural and artistic appreciation at work in the "Festival City." Events like the Summer Solstice Festival are an integral part of summer music making in Edmonton, and the festival rightly holds a place among the top musical experiences of the season, in our city.

