

Performers and audience share six Mozart quartets in two recitals on one memorable day.



As part of the Mozart Project, violinists Alice Byol Kim and Emily Shehi, violist Keigo Suzuki, and cellist Chase Park played Mozart's Quartet in C major, K. 465 ("Dissonance").

“It’s All About Listening”

Imagine it's the year 1785. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart has just completed his “Dissonance” quartet, K. 465, and you find yourself a guest at a prominent home in Vienna for an evening of chamber music. Your fellow partygoers, themselves amateur musicians and connoisseurs, mill about the living room, chatting and noshing as their attention shifts to four string players clustered in the center of the space. The music begins.

BY DIANA WENSLEY
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

This scene may describe the most authentic chamber music experience, long since supplanted by modern concert staging conventions. However, in two back-to-back recitals on a single Saturday last fall, Curtis students and alumni brought to life the atmosphere of an 18th-century living room for a dedicated group of listeners.

In an effort known casually as the “Mozart Project,” six string groups tackled Mozart’s beloved set of quartets dedicated to his longtime friend and mentor, Franz Joseph Haydn, also presenting historical anecdotes and context for the audience. The two recitals were divided by a casual buffet lunch, where performers mingled with listeners. Steven Tenenbom, chamber music coordinator at Curtis, previously managed two similar projects, focusing on the six quartets of Haydn’s Op. 50 in the fall of 2015 and Beethoven’s Op. 18 last spring. Driven by Curtis’s “learn by doing” philosophy, Mr. Tenenbom believes the research-based projects offer new insights to the performers. “More knowledge helps [the students] to understand the music they’re playing. And more ability to communicate with audiences really helps everybody.” Audiences, meanwhile, gain a new appreciation for “why [the music] is there other than entertainment,” he continues.

In an innovation for the fall project, the quartets were presented in the round. The six ensembles—five student groups in addition to this year’s quartet in residence, the Zorá Quartet—made a joint decision to sit facing inward, looking at each other while surrounded by the audience. Listeners in Gould Rehearsal Hall were encouraged to change seats during the performance, stretch their legs, or grab an extra cup of coffee in the Bonovitz Concourse.

The performers felt a different energy with the unconventional set-up—“a little disconcerting in some ways,” admits violist Julian Tello, but prevailingly intimate. Julian notes that he normally has to concentrate to project his sound, “making sure that I’m playing to the audience and not for myself.” But in this configuration, he says, “we played quieter than we normally play [and] the audience was close enough that they could hear it.” As the sound came from all directions, “we could affect a larger number of people, using less of what we have to give. You could kind of whisper to the audience—I think you could kind of hear them lean in.”

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

In preparation for the November performance, the students honed their audience engagement and musical skills in Sunday-night chamber music classes and with the guidance of several faculty members. For example, as they prepared K. 387, the Zorá Quartet were coached by Mr. Tenenbom as well as cello faculty Peter Wiley and violin faculty Pamela Frank. Mia Chung of the musical studies faculty helped the ensemble to analyze the work’s counterpoint, especially its fugal material, and made their ideas “more vibrant,” according to second violinist Seula Lee.

Jonathan Coopersmith, chair of musical studies, helped the students to understand the historical context surrounding each work and to coordinate their research. “Knowing even one little fact about the piece can change the whole experience,” says Mr. Coopersmith. This knowledge often shaped the performances in interesting ways. Julian Tello cites the colorful history of the



Quartet in D minor, K. 421, written while Mozart’s wife Constanze gave birth in the next room: “In one of her letters [she] says the rising string figures in the second movement are supposed to be ... the pains and the screams of childbirth,” he says. “We actually got to take that bit and rehearse it a bunch of different ways to try and get it to ... sound a little more like that, even though it’s not exactly programmatic.”

While honing their commentaries, each quartet kept in mind that any audience includes listeners with varying levels of musical knowledge. The members of the Zorá Quartet pointed out broadly relatable moments that they found interesting. Cellist Zizai Ning and violinist Seula Lee detailed the intimacy between Mozart and Haydn, and violist Pablo Muñoz Salido explained the parallels in their respective compositions. “We found that Mozart actually uses a lot of Haydn’s style in writing. For example, sudden changes in dynamics ... the use of chromatic scales ... a sense of humor,”

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Pablo told the audience. “There’s a really awesome joke that he writes at the end of the piece,” he continued, referring to a boisterous false ending just seconds before the real, much gentler finish—a trick that elicited early applause and chuckles from the listeners.

A recital should be an “experience for all people,” Mr. Tenenbom believes. Communication between the performers and the audience can open unexpected avenues of education and enjoyment, much like a docent tour at an art museum. “[People] walk out of the performance feeling that there’s something different about themselves—something’s changed.” The student performers, too, gained a new perspective. “I think the twenty-four young people really feel like they’ve accomplished something and will look back on this time as one of their more important experiences,” he says. “It’s all about collaboration and really—bottom line—it’s all about listening.” ♦

Diana Wensley, a 2014 trumpet graduate of Curtis, is interim patron services manager at Curtis and works as a freelance musician in the Philadelphia area.

Opposite top left: Pablo Muñoz Salido, violist of the Zorá Quartet, spoke before Curtis’s quartet in residence played Mozart’s Quartet in G major, K. 387.

Opposite bottom left: The musicians mingled with the audience during a break for lunch between the two recitals.

Center: The audience surrounded the performers in Gould Rehearsal Hall.

Above: Cellist Zachary Mowitz, violinist Angela Sin Ying Chan, and violist Michael Casimir

BARTÓK’S SIX QUARTETS

On April 29 from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., student ensembles will perform the complete Bartók quartets—a pinnacle of the 20th-century quartet repertoire—in an intimate, free event at Gould Rehearsal Hall. Details at

www.curtis.edu/Calendar