DISCOVERY AND REDISCOVERY

It has been discovery and re-discovery time of late with our Embassy Series, in people and place.

In our last two concerts, both at the Embassy of Austria, we re-discovered artists we had discovered before. Austrian pianist Till Fellner, the classical musician par excellence, returned to us with a grand evening of Bach, Mozart, Haydn and Schumann on March 6, reminding us how far Fellner, now a major and still youthful star in the classical firmament, has come. Fellner was often a part of our season in his early years, and returns to us still.

We introduced the world class Minetti Quartet to Washington a number of years ago, and they too, have become a regular part of the life of the Embassy Series.

The string quartet—Maria Ehmer, violin, Anna Knopp, violin, Milan Milojicic, viola and Leonard Roczek, cello—brought their stylish, smooth energetic ways to the Embassy of Austria, with a bravura program of Mozart, Shostakovich and Mendelssohn and triumphed, even overcoming a broken string on the cello in the midst of the Shostakovich String Quartet No.8 in c-minor, op. 110.

The works—especially the first half, which featured a fugue styled by Mozart by way of Bach, and a very contemporary, somber take on string quartet by Shostakovich inspired by the ruins of Dresden—were varied, performed not just precisely, as the Mozart fugue required, but with great verve and dashes of individual personalities.
I supposed it’s easy to diagnose the mechanics and workings of a string quartet composition—the designs work a little like drawings for an automobile or an intricate architectural drawings, but are executed in ways that are appropriate to the more fluid, moving-parts things in life from everything to ballet dancing, to modern dance, to a basketball fast break or infield throw-around to the catch-and-fly art of acrobats on the trapeze. Every little piece of action on string and bow and the weight between them and the like can be examined for correctness without ever getting to the mystery of the sublime pleasures that the playing of the various pieces elicit.

It’s easy to see that there are as many very good string quartets in the world as there are very good literary novelists, all of them working within the framework of a large basic repertoire to choose from and build programs around it. They don’t play bad music—even if there are surely some that play music badly, for whatever reasons, at one time or another. What sets string quartets apart, from my not so vast experience, appears to be a matter of style, personalities, energy, experience, freshness, a particular kind of playing and sound. This isn’t necessarily a question of one group of musicians being better than another, although those qualities certainly exists. To me, it’s a question of what the group brings to the music. I suspect many of us would be perfectly happy and rewarded to listen to the Mozart-Shostakovich-Mendelssohn program played by another string quartet without taking anything away from the Minetti quartet.

The fugue in the Mozart is practically a textbook example of a certain kind of joy that explodes from a string quartet, where the issue of playing together and apart and with the precision of a clock and the tiny dribs of freedom between musical handoffs occur. The passages starting in one place—say the first violin, and ending somewhere else, then starting up and down the scale all over again—seems to me to be swoon-inducing. It also makes you watch the musicians intently, their bow strokes, the expressions, the soundless sighs, the arched backward move of a head, the strong push of bow, eyebrows, closed eyes, strands of hair, they become a part of the piece.

The Minettis, if we can call them that, have steadily risen, with bursts of concert appearances all over the world, with CD’s, and with reputation. They played here last year, but minus Maria Ehmer who had become a brand new mother. She and Anna Knopp come from the same small town in Austria. The physical look of the quartet speaks to the endless variety of music itself—Ehmer—blondish brown hair, Knopp, elfin with long black hair, both in gold dresses, the Serbian, Milojicic
with a rumpled look, playing with casual intentness and Roczek, who has a cello rock band, suave and graceful, centering the whole.

Gary Tischler