

Graffe String Quartet

U.S. Debut Tour 2007

“The Graffe Quartet played wonderfully and the musicians’ collaboration with Michiko in the Schumann Piano Quintet was highly successful. We were pleased to welcome them to Spivey Hall. Thanks for your help in making this concert possible. All best wishes,”

Samuel C. Dixon
Executive & Artistic Director,
Spivey Hall

Czech quartet flaunts facets of homeland composer’s gem

By David Williams
For the Gazette

The Czech composer Bedrich Smetana created two string quartets. The first one, “From My Life,” gets played a lot; the second, not so much. I can’t remember hearing it played in Charleston in my 17 years as a critic.

Leave it to a young Czech ensemble on its first U.S. tour, the Graffe String Quartet, to make public the glories of this neglected gem. Its performance of the Second, in D Minor, Saturday night for the Charleston Chamber Music Society, revealed a masterpiece, just not a very long one.

The first movement packed shifts among furious unisons, ruminative quietude and wavelike surges in its brief 140 measures. The second had the flavor of Dvorak’s “Slavonic Dances,” here a dance in duple meter alternated with one in triple, each full of rhythmic fun and inspired melody.

The third movement recalled the first’s furious opening before settling into a marchlike mood

Review

that drew on cantilenas from the first violin and cello (the gifted Stepan Graffe and Michal Hreno), while the other violin and the viola offered florid lines in support. The too-brief finale returned to leaping dance music.

The Graffe’s performance compelled. The fits and starts of the outer movements could have seemed formless, but did not. Second violinist Lukas Bednarik and violist Lukas Cybulski gave just enough clarity to the textural complexities of the third movement to offer substance.

Haydn’s Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 33, No. 2, “The Joke,” was brilliant in its elegance and wit. Stepan Graffe played the Scherzo’s melody with little slides among the pitches to give a slightly beer-sloshed feel, while an emphasis on the more dissonant chords made it a tad darker. The slow movement had ear-catching timbres from Cybulski and Hreno.

The famous joke of the rondo finale has rarely been funnier.

The opening two measures, which already have been played numerous times to signal the return of the main theme, return as the very last sounds of the piece. Of course, it sounds as if the piece is starting up again.

So during the last few bars of the piece there are at least two times that the music sounds as if it has finished. The Graffe drew a bit of applause from the crowd at these points. Then came the ending complete with askance glances from the players and giggles from the listeners.

The pianist Michiko Otaki joined the ensemble for a riveting account of Schumann’s Quintet in E-flat, Op. 44. It was very different from the Montclair Quartet’s account of the piece, with the pianist Sonya Mason, in October, notably in the funeral march of the slow movement, which was haunting but not spectral.

The Graffe and Otaki played elastically and energetically, while leaving no fingering unexplored. After three curtain calls the group tore through the work’s concluding double fugue as an encore.

Friends of Music ends season with a world-class program by Michiko Otaki and the Graffe Quartet

March 23, 2007 By Karl Burkhardt



The internationally acclaimed Graffe Quartet, on a tour that started in San Francisco and wound through Chicago and West Palm Beach, stopped in Lake City for a concert at the First Presbyterian Church.

Pianist Michiko Otaki, who has performed with the quartet in international festivals, is touring with them.

Guests at the Friday evening performance were delighted with the world-class musicians. The Graffe Quartet was founded at the Brno conservatory in 1997. The four award-winning classical musicians perform a full range of classical music, but also focus on pieces by Czech composers.

These young musicians bring tremendous energy and passion, while displaying superb technical skills. The works they chose for the performance, by Adam Jan Mica, Josef Suk and Bedrich Smetana, are intricate and demanding, with rapid changes in tempo and emotion.

Michiko Otaki joined them after the intermission, for a performance of “Quintet for Piano and Strings in E flat major.”

Otaki is known for her clarity and the richness of her sound. Her petite size belies the power of her playing. For many in the audience, she was barely visible at the piano when she started to play. Yet she moved across the keyboard with ease, standing to play the most powerful passages.

Schumann’s piece is a showcase for piano and quintet, one that demands both passion and perfection. The interplay of refrains between the piano and the strings makes it especially interesting and enjoyable, even for those who may not be familiar with classical music.

Otaki and the Graffe Quartet received standing ovations after the performance.

Some in the audience were music students and this was an opportunity for them to listen to a world-class performance.

Raymond Weiss of Raymond Weiss Artist Management Inc. of New York is accompanying his artists on the tour. He has scheduled many performances in Lake City, including several for Otaki. Lake City was scheduled between Georgia Southwestern State University and Atlanta, Ga.

Lake City gets world-class musicians because of Bill Poplin, Weiss said. Poplin is Director of Music Ministries at First Presbyterian Church which hosts the Friends of Music series. Performers enjoy the acoustics and intimacy of the church setting and they enjoy coming to Lake City because Bill and Linda Poplin are their friends.

Friends of Music accepts donations from those who attend the concerts, but there is no admission charge. A reception follows each concert. This was the final concert of the 2006-07 series.

“What a nice review! They were equally impressive in Greenville. Very energetic and fulfilling concert. Kudos.” Falls Harris, President
International Chamber Music Series
Greenville, SC

“Michiko, thanks again for a splendid program. The third movement of the Schumann was just breathtaking! We look forward to your next visit!!” James F. Mellichamp, D. M.,
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Piedmont College, Demorest, GA

Graffe String Quartet makes sublime music

By NICK JUSTICE FOR THE DAILY MAIL

I can't remember the last time I sat straight up in my seat and said "wow" right out loud during a concert performance, but Saturday night I did just that.

The Charleston Chamber Music Society presented the Graffe String Quartet in concert at Christ Church United Methodist as a finale to the season.

These four young men are touring the USA, on loan from the Czech Republic, and the music that they make is sublime.

The tradition of a Central European string sound dates back to Haydn.

To me it is like a beautiful piece of polished amber.

Dark and lustrous and so clear that you can hear into it forever.

Graffe began their program with a short four movement work by Franz Joseph Haydn, The Quartet in E-flat Major.

Its nickname, "The Joke," relates to an unusual little tag at the very end, which tricks the audience into thinking that the work has finished, but it hasn't.

A nice treat for April the first.

Their second work was the Quartet No. 2 in d minor by Bedrich Smetana.

Both pieces were studio first takes and my listening experience was so satisfied that I checked my watch after the Smetana, to make sure they hadn't shortened or left something out.

Time moved very slowly as I savored each and every note.

After intermission Graffe returned to the stage with pianist Michiko Otaki.

All of four foot nothing, with a smile that radiated throughout the room, Otaki sat down at the piano and was ready to play Robert Schumann's Quintet for Piano and Strings in E-flat Major.

I assumed my usual pose of back straight and eye closed, the better to hear the music and it was at the moment of the first note that I did the "Wow" thing.

The group claimed and sustained a power of majesty throughout the work so convincingly that the audience demanded that they return for an encore, which was a repeat of the last movement of the work.

This was an absolute gem of a concert. So much so that I hope that a way to have these artists return might be found.

Mellow Music Streams From Hilltop Academy in La Cañada Flintridge



By Bill Peters

Czech-based Graffe Quartet performed the music of Mozart, Smetana and Schumann at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy Sunday afternoon before a crowd of over 200.

The Da Camera Society of Mount Saint Mary's College has been presenting chamber music in the salons of architectural treasures of Southern California since 1937 and on Sunday afternoon brought the Czech-based Graffe String Quartet to the Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy in La Cañada Flintridge for its 15th concert this season.

The concert was held in the music room off the foyer of the structure, completed in 1927 on 40 acres as a hotel. The hilltop location on this particular afternoon was warm and dry, leading to much program-fanning by the crowd of over 200 and some considerable tuning of instruments by the performing string quartet.

The Graffe String Quartet has been in existence since 1997, founded by violinist Stepan Graffe with fellow conservatory members from the Brno Conservatory in Czechoslovakia. All quartet members are from communities surrounding Brno and some are continuing graduate studies. The youthfulness of the quartet was evident in several ways. Physically, they bounded to the riser in the center of the room on which they performed. Musically, the quartet was fresh, bright and even athletic but lacking in experienced uance.

The major piece on the program, Schumann's Quintet for Piano and Strings, was the best of the afternoon anchored by the strong hand of Michiko Otaki at a responsive Bosendorfer piano. Otaki has been associated with several Brno Conservatory groups for some time.

Opening with Mozart's well-known "Hunt" String Quartet No. 17, the quartet quickly established a fine blending but a fast-paced concluding movement nearly went awry. Before intermission, their reading of Smetana's String Quartet No. 2 in D brought the strong nationalistic feelings the composer is noted for and was matched by the emotional fervor of the Graffe String Quartet.

"I wanted you to know what an absolutely delightful performance we had from Graffe and Michiko. The quartet had an artistic maturity that defied their ages. Perhaps one of the most homogeneous sounding quartets I've every heard. And Michiko continues to impress me with her ensemble playing. She's like a great wine. Thank you for bring these musicians to the U.S."

John S. Beckford, D.M.A.

Professor of Music, Furman University

"The Graffe performance was very well received by the Chicago Chamber Music Society. Everyone felt exhilarated by the passion evident in their playing."

Sincerely,

Gay Stanek, President

"We have heard the Graffe Quartet at the Czech and Slovak Club in Miami on 3/19 and they were great!"

Anna and Paul Balev

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