



May 26, 2021

PSO Continues Outdoor Chamber Concert Series with Visiting String Quartet

By Nancy Plum

The weather has been good to Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) this spring. The Orchestra returned to presenting outdoor concerts this past month, and so far each performance evening has been a relaxed opportunity under a clear sky to enjoy high-quality chamber music. Last Thursday night at Morven Museum and Garden's pool house, Princeton Symphony Orchestra presented the New York-based Momenta Quartet to an audience comfortably "podded" on the lawn. The four musicians of the Quartet — violinists Emilie-Anne Gendron and Alex Shiozaki, violist Stephanie Griffin, and cellist Michael Haas — performed four representative pieces of "Great Music from the Recent and Distant Past," and interspersed with commentary and musical background, these works created a very entertaining evening under the stars.

Sixteenth-century English composer William Byrd is most well-known for sacred choral music, but his large repertory of keyboard pieces brought English works of this genre to new heights. Byrd composed several keyboard collections, often pairing dance movements. The "pavane," a stately and dignified dance, was frequently paired with the more lively and complex "galliard." Momenta Quartet played one of these pavane and galliard pairings by Byrd with a somewhat straight tone, reaffirming the 16th-century sound. Violinists Gendron and Shiozaki were well matched in the opening pavane, and the Quartet consistently executed well measures of detached notes. The galliard was uniformly brisk, with the slightly off-beat rhythmic accents well played.

Early 20th-century American composer Florence Price has been popular this year, and her works have received attention from almost every local ensemble. For Thursday night's performance, Momenta Quartet selected the second movement "andante moderato" from Price's 1929 *String Quartet in G Major*, a work

which has gained particular popularity over the past few years. As with much of Price's music, this movement was vocally infused with American folk tunes and spirituals. Led by first violinist Gendron, Momenta Quartet created a very peaceful musical palette, with the ensemble sound echoing lightly in the gazebo in which the musicians were playing. The second section of the movement featured violist Griffin in a rich melody with all players taking effective liberties with the tempo and ending the piece in a full instrumental sound.

Momenta Quartet has built a reputation playing both classical masterworks and pieces from the musical avant-garde, and has a long-standing relationship with American composer John Patitucci, who maintained parallel career as an acoustic bass player with some of the 20th-century's leading blues and jazz players. Patitucci's one movement *Snapshots for String Quartet* was commissioned by the Elements String Quartet in 2002 and was inspired by a photograph of the composer's mother. Momenta Quartet began the work with a cello melody smoothly played by Michael Haas, with a second elegant melodic passage played by first violinist Gendron. A slightly rocking accompaniment by second violin and viola gave the work an appropriate maternal feel.

The first three short pieces were merely a warm-up for the substantial work which closed the program — Sergei Prokofiev's 1942 *String Quartet No. 2 in F Major*. Following the German invasion of Russia in World War II, Prokofiev was evacuated to a remote area of the Caucasus mountain range, at the intersection of Europe and Asia. There the composer found an abundance of regional folk music which he incorporated into his classical works, including this string quartet.

The first movement "allegro sostenuto," inspired by a peasant dance, featured precise dotted rhythms and an effectively heavy-handed peasant sound from the Momenta Quartet, with all four instruments uniform in the movement's quirkiness. The second movement, based on a Kabardinian love song, began with Haas playing a sweet cello melody, answered by the other instruments. One could hear the isolation of the mountains during wartime in the music, as well as the intensity of the conditions under which Prokofiev was living. The third movement folk dance brought joy to the musical atmosphere, with unusual technical effects from the violins.

Throughout its more than 15-year history, Momenta Quartet has maintained an equal commitment to classical masterpieces, contemporary works, and up-and-coming composers not always getting the attention they deserve on the musical landscape. Thursday night's concert was an eclectic combination of all three, well complemented by the stillness of a pre-summer evening.

Princeton Symphony will present its next live performance at Morven Museum and Garden on Thursday, March 27 at 6 p.m. Featured in this "America the Beautiful" concert will be a Princeton Symphony Orchestra Brass Quintet playing music of American composers in honor of Memorial Day weekend. Ticket information about this performance and information about the Symphony's other virtual events can be found at the Princeton Symphony website at princetonsymphony.org.

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