

**CHAMBER MUSIC
 REVIEW**

A Disappointing Mix

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St. Petersburg Quartet



Paul Galbraith

By Nikki Buechler

The St Petersburg String Quartet's concert at Dinkelspiel Auditorium last Wednesday was appropriately programmed with music to compliment the ensemble's origin. The outer pieces consisted of a charming selection of Aleksandr Glazunov's *Novelettes* and Aleksandr Borodin's String Quartet No. 1, pieces that are not stylistically opposed. The middle piece was somewhat disconcerting, featuring guest guitarist Paul Galbraith with the group. This chaotic piece was *A Rhapsody for Guitar and String Quartet* by Zurab Nadarejshvili, a world premiere no less, commissioned for the group. While contrasting, and thus appropriate in that sense, it did not complement the surrounding works, nor did it display the St. Petersburg's strengths.

Nadarejshvili's rhapsody was so abstract that it was impossible to tell whether any of the players were doing anything according to direction at all. If there was genuine feeling gripping the players it was hard to discern. They looked like they were concentrating on getting it 'right' but it seemed a shame to have a guitarist onstage and still have no idea whether he was a good player or not after hearing him play for 10 minutes. As for the string quartet, it is an accomplishment when a student stops making some of the noises these players were making on purpose. While there may be, and almost certainly is, genuine intellectual (and possibly musical) merit within this piece, that cannot be gleaned on first hearing. Even if it is considered art, it seemed to be intentional ugliness.

This monument to disorganization followed three of the *Five Novelettes for String Quartet* Op. 15 by Glazunov. As an opening work it was well chosen, with idiomatic short themes and stylized characters. The SPSQ dove straight into the works without hesitation. Though they played with superb intonation and ensemble from the beginning, they could have had a bit more fun in parts, perhaps taking a few more risks.

Not a good sandwich

The SPSQ's outer pieces were both charming. The group played with a strong sense of purpose and direction throughout and they worked well with the natural flow of phrasing. First violinist Alla Aranovskaya has a graceful style and is very precise, but there was something disconcerting about her playing. This became evident in the Nadarejshvili and was confirmed in the Borodin. Aranovskaya changed clothes in the intermission. Though her appearance was transformed by her evening dress, her style was not. A persistent unconscious vibrato affected her playing, even on occasions where the rest of the group deliberately withheld theirs. Though the last two pieces could not have been more different, her approach to them was too similar to be a coincidence.

Parts of the Borodin seemed a bit perfunctory, but the quartet may have been losing energy by the end of the night. They have reportedly been on an intense schedule and it showed in some places. It was a shame, because only very minor details, like the phrase that has vibrato on almost but not quite every note, or the pianissimo that only reaches to the bottom of their comfort zone, took the edge off this otherwise unproblematic concert. It is details like these, though, that make the difference between good and great.

(Nikki Buechler is a PhD student at the music department at Stanford University. She has a Master's degree from St Catherine's College, Oxford, and spent 5 years working as a viola player in chamber groups, orchestras and as an occasional soloist in London, England.)

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