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CLASSICAL NOTES

String quartets are the focus at Tanglewood

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 27, 2013



Emerson String Quartet is (from left) Eugene Drucker, Philip Setzer, Larry Dutton, and its new member, Paul Watkins.

Although the Boston Symphony Orchestra doesn't begin its Tanglewood season until next weekend, the Tanglewood Music Center, its summer academy for emerging professional musicians, is already active. Many of its string players have been participating in an intensive string quartet seminar led by Norman Fischer, the TMC's chamber music coordinator and the former cellist of the Concord String Quartet.

The culmination of this activity is the annual String Quartet Marathon. On Monday and Tuesday, various configurations of TMC fellows will spend many hours playing a plethora of string quartet excerpts; the exact repertoire will be determined a few days before it begins. For a modest ticket price, visitors to Seiji Ozawa Hall can roam through large segments of the quartet literature, in the hands of musicians just beginning to stake a claim to them.

But that's just a sliver of the upcoming quartet activity. Indeed, with so many chamber music festivals in New England, string quartets are pretty much ubiquitous during the summer. Given the genre's reputation for both tradition and adventure, that seems just right.

Tanglewood itself will see one of the season's most important quartet concerts of the summer: The Emerson String Quartet comes to Ozawa Hall on Aug. 14. It will be that group's first Massachusetts appearance in its new configuration, with cellist Paul Watkins having taken David Finckel's spot after 34 years. How will the change alter the Emerson's sound, or its energetic style? Listeners will get a clue at the Tanglewood concert when the new foursome plays Beethoven's first "Razumovsky" Quartet, in F major, an Emerson specialty that opens with a brisk, driving cello solo. Music of Haydn and Britten is also on the program.

Also visiting Tanglewood this summer is the Borodin Quartet, still in business after more than 65 years and fewer personnel changes than you'd think. They play Brahms and Tchaikovsky on July 17. And this year's Festival of Contemporary Music will open on Aug. 8 with Elliott Carter's First Quartet, part of a tribute to the composer, who died in November at 103.

Elsewhere, the Rockport Chamber Music Festival has already hosted concerts by the Jupiter and Calder quartets; another young US-based group, the Vega String Quartet, plays a program of Haydn, Beethoven, and David Kirkland Garner's "i ain't broke (but i'm badly bent)" (June 28). Just over the New York border in Woodstock, the Maverick Concerts boasts an overabundance of distinguished foursomes, including the Shanghai (July 7), Escher (July 28), Leipzig (Aug. 4), and Enso (Aug. 25). In the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, the American String Quartet brings a program of Haydn, Janacek, and Schubert to Provincetown on Aug. 5 and substitutes Shostakovich for Janacek in Cotuit on Aug. 6.

To the south, a distinguished quartet will close out a lengthy career: The Tokyo String Quartet, which has been through many iterations, is calling it a day. Its final concert is July 6 at the Norfolk Chamber Music

Festival in Connecticut, and the program — Haydn, Bartok, Debussy — hews closely to the repertoire the Tokyo has lovingly polished over a 44-year-span. That the Tokyo's gorgeous, rounded timbre is still intact is evident on its final recording, of Dvorak's "American" Quartet and Smetana's E minor "From My Life" (Harmonia Mundi). Other groups may have probed these works more deeply, but few can match the Tokyo's sonic luster.

That's just one of several worthy quartet recordings of recent vintage. Few are as consequential as "Fellow Traveler," which collects the complete quartet music of American composer John Adams in superb performances by the young Attacca Quartet (Azica). These works aren't as renowned as Adams's orchestral works, but by digging hard into their funky eclecticism, the Attacca makes a forceful case for them.

"A Walking Fire" (Mercury Classics) is the new album from Brooklyn Rider, a group committed to wide exploration in and out of the quartet literature. Gathering together Bartok's Second Quartet, Lev Zhurbin's Gypsy-inflected "Culai," and "Three Miniatures" by the quartet's own violinist Colin Jacobsen, the recording makes an important statement about cultural curiosity and musical interconnection. That alone would justify hearing it, but the performances (especially the Bartok) are also fantastic.

Finally, one of the most unusual recent quartet recordings comes from the ECM label. "Reinventions" explores the work of Italian bassist and composer Stefano Scodanibbio, bringing together his arrangements of Mexican songs, Spanish guitar music, and three excerpts from Bach's "Art of Fugue." It sounds like a recipe for a full-blooded stylistic *mélange*, but Scodanibbio (who died last year at 55) binds them together by his arrangements, most of which are eerily slow and full of string harmonics. The effect is skeletal and chilling, and completely jarring on the few occasions when the music bursts forth in full sound. Quartetto Prometeo realizes this project beautifully, showing in the process how much life remains in this venerable form.