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Glorious Strings



By Catherine Waffle

With the opening notes of this concert, it became apparent to the Barrie audience in the *Georgian Music* series that they were witnessing and hearing world-class talent! The aptly-titled concert, "Glorious Strings", featured not one, but two of the greatest string quartets based in Canada. The Lafayette Quartet has been the quartet in residence at the University of Victoria in BC since 1991. These four talented women have performed together for more than 30 years. Today they combined forces with The Saguenay Quartet from Chicoutimi, Quebec to present a programme of String Octets - a bit of a rarity in the musical world. The Saguenay musicians have also been together for decades and their solid cohesion was evident.

String Octets present an interesting and challenging form. Unlike other ensembles, where instrument groups, such as violins, all play the same part - the octet offers 8 individual parts playing simultaneously. It allows for rich sonorities, a depth of sound and it requires that all 8 musicians be of equal, virtuosic ability. These musicians did not disappoint! They began with a little-known Swedish composer

(Niels Wilhelm Gade) from the 19th century. His Octet in four movements featured subtle, moving parts beneath longer, more melodic lines from other parts in the Allegro opening. The Andantino section offered a solo melody from the first violin which was then passed to other instruments in turn. A languid and mellow mood was achieved in the minor key. The contrasting Scherzo followed with energetic, rhythmic, pizzicato effects. A brighter mood capped off this work with the Finale.

The second selection was a complex work by a 20th century composer - A. Ichmouratov (b. 1973). Subtitled, "The Letter", this composition was based on a short novel with that title. A story of unrequited love and secrets revealed only after death in a powerful letter was realized in this most evocative and haunting piece. Mournful melodic lines were pitted against agitated sections. High/low contrasts were evident. Special effects, such as pizzicato or tremolo on harmonic notes created the mood. A hushed, breathless ending capped off the drama.

Mendelssohn's String Octet, Op. 20, one of the crowning achievements in this genre, provided the audience with enough excitement to last indefinitely! The octet moved through the piece, from the dazzling melody on the first violin through the serene moments of the Andante, the sustained tension of the Scherzo, with its rapid passages and tightly controlled energy, to an exhilarating, climactic Presto! The cello launched into this brilliant opening and passed the melody on to each instrument from bottom to top like a 'hot potato'! One wondered how opposites could co-exist: playing with such abandon and yet so tightly controlled. It was like dancing on a high-wire without a safety net. A thrilling experience for a most appreciative audience!