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Review: Dazzling Muir quartet conquers difficult conditions

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By **Keith Powers**
Contributing writer
September 24, 2014 12:00 AM

The reviewer has to check everything.

Was the Muir String Quartet, which opened the Concerts at the Point season Sunday afternoon at the Westport Point's United Methodist Church, faithful to the scores? Of course.

More important, did they project their own sense of enjoyment in the works of Hugo Wolf, Janacek, and Dvorak that were on the program? Most definitely.

Did they interact with each other frequently, bringing out the four-musicians-as-one-unit feeling that makes chamber music come alive for audiences? Without a doubt.

And finally, did they somehow manage, on this broiling, humid last day of summer, to keep their intonation secure as they battled the elements? Stunningly, this never even became an issue.

After a while, there was nothing left to do but enjoy the music.

The estimable Muirs — violinists Peter Zazofsky and Lucia Lin, violist Steven Ansell, and cellist Michael Reynolds — survived the humidity and treated the sold-out church to a touching, well conceived program, marked by confident playing and musical insights.

The quartet, in its 36th season, opened with Wolf's unfinished gem, "Italian Serenade." A fragment of a complete string quartet, unfinished because Wolf spent his final years institutionalized, the work conveys that fulfilling mixture of complexity and accessibility in its brief seven minutes.

History says Wolf revered Wagner and the Romantics, and held the fort against the oncoming "modern" ideas of Schoenberg and the subsequent Viennese composers. Some evidence of those details may be evident here, but more important, this short work has lyric energy, vivid musical figures, and smart ensemble interaction. It works as an intense and truly apt concert opener.

Janacek's great quartet, known as "Intimate Letters," has been overwhelmed, as Zazofsky pointed out, by the gossip surrounding it. Written for a younger, married woman with whom the composer carried on an intense, platonic relationship — highlighted by hundreds of letters sent back-and-forth — the quartet marks the epitome of Janacek's unique style.

That style uses his native Czech musical heritage, and his language — rhythmically, brief passages run one after another, in short phrases, not in the long sentences of most classical styles.

The result? Janacek flows one compelling musical idea — sometimes a light melody, sometimes the clever ensemble interplay — after another, a river of creativity.

Throughout the work — and it was getting brutally humid, poison to the careful tuning of stringed instruments — none of the players wavered in intonation. In fact, nobody even seemed to retune during the piece.

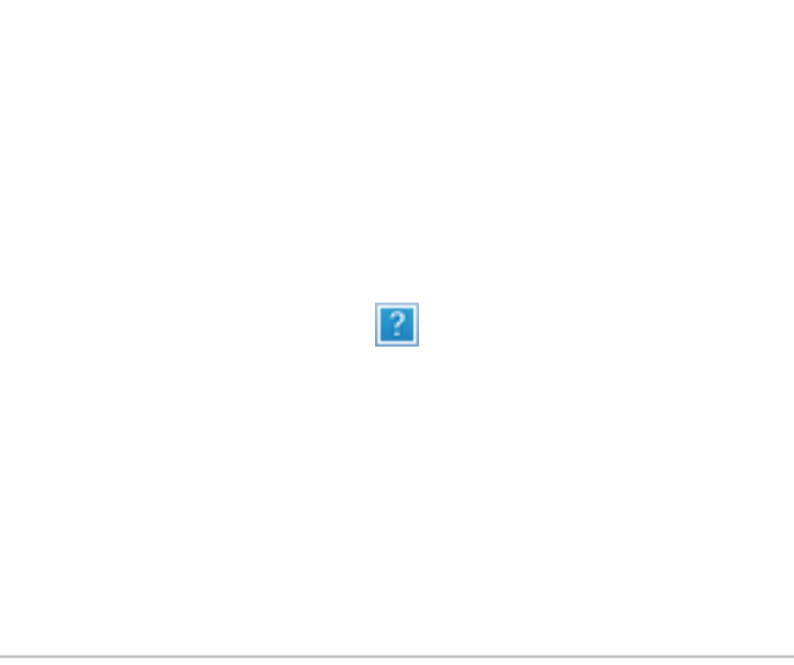
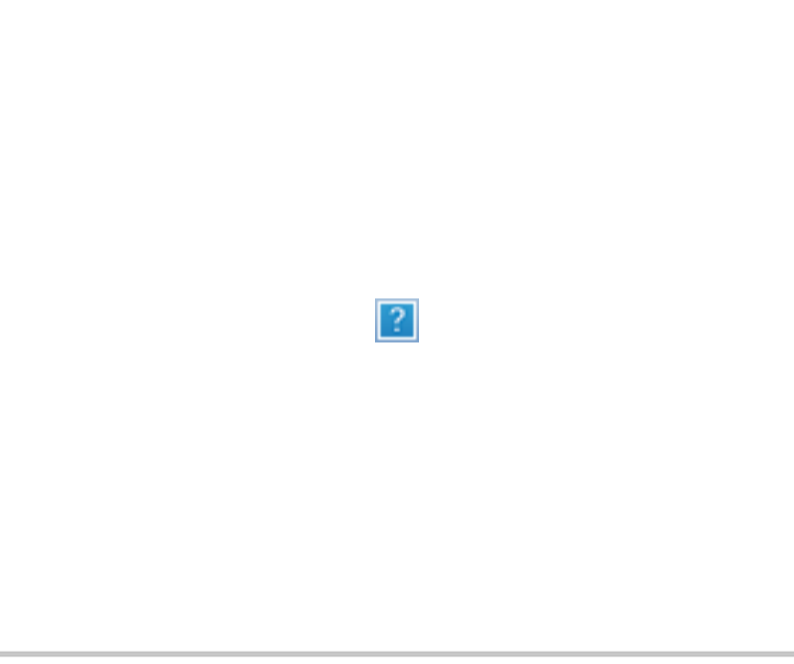
After intermission, and a few wardrobe changes, Muir offered Dvorak's C major quartet: deep, tuneful, long and fulfilling. A six-note motif, exchanged first between Zazofsky and Lin, and later incorporated into the lower voices, emerges in the opening movement, and stays in the atmosphere until it re-emerges in the finale.

In between, there was much to enjoy. The Andante works like an echo, its slight, rising hint of a song starting in the first chair, picked up by Lin in the second, and eventually working its way into the fabric of the movement.

The long Scherzo, with its own rising scale motif, beautifully sets up the finale, when the original idea, like a lost

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relative, returns, changed and more interesting than before.

Concerts at the Point continues Oct. 19 with a performance by the South Coast Chamber Music Series. Subsequent performances include Frederick Moyer and the Dave Brubeck Tribute Quartet (Dec. 7), Boston Trio (March 22), Ryo Goto and Carmen Rodriguez-Peralta (April 19), and the Claremont Trio (May 31). For tickets and information, visit www.concertsatthepoint.org or call (508) 636-0698.

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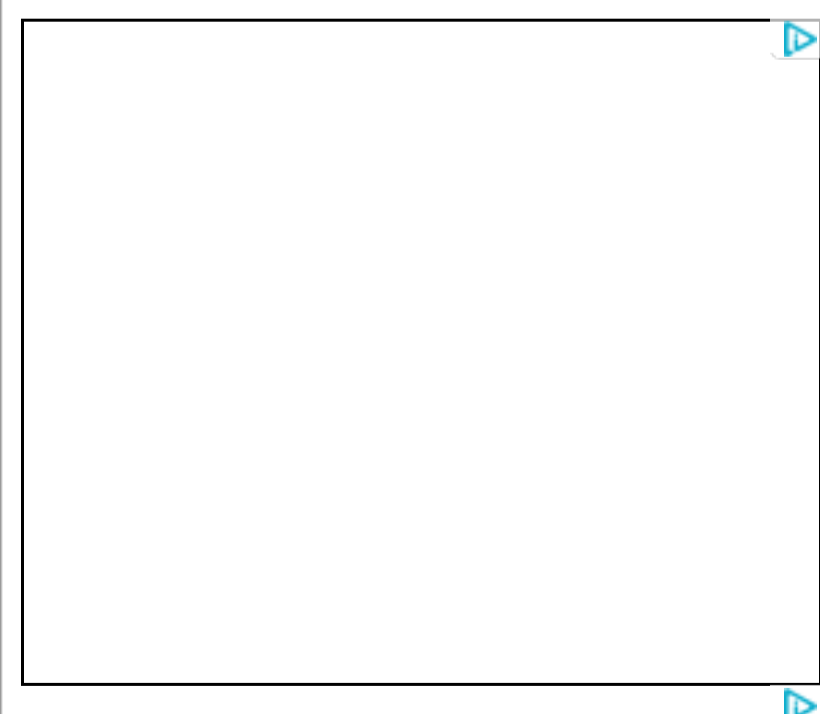
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