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Music Review: Opus One delights in making great music

Wednesday, December 03, 2003

By Eric Haines

On Monday at Carnegie Music Hall in Oakland, the Pittsburgh Chamber Music Society presented Opus One in a concert that combined the technical mastery of a solo recital with the exuberance of a jam session.

Formed in 1998, [Opus One](#) is an all-star team of heavy hitters -- violinist Ida Kavafian, violist Steven Tenenbom, cellist Peter Wiley and pianist Anne-Marie McDermott -- who revel in the art of chamber music. Their passion for the genre is evident from their resumes. They've had or have memberships in the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Beaux Arts Trio, and the Guarneri, Emerson and Orion quartets. Their faculty posts include Curtis, Mannes, Hartt, Manhattan and Cincinnati, and they've been associated as performers or administrators with more than a dozen annual chamber music festivals.



OPUS ONE from left to right Ida Kavafian, violin, Anne-Marie McDermott, piano, Peter Wiley, cello and Steven Tenenbom, viola .
(William Wegman)

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Monday's concert featured an all-Czech program -- Antonin Dvorak's Sonatina in G major for Violin and Piano and Piano Quartet in E-flat major, and Bohuslav Martinu's Piano Quartet. Ostensibly intended to launch the centenary celebrations of Dvorak's death in May 1904, what the program actually did was to take chamber music out of its sublime rarefaction and give Opus One an apt outlet for their brio.

The Sonatina, written during Dvorak's three-year American stay, dovetails sprightly thematic expositions of American style with

developmental passages of heavy European romanticism. Kavafian and McDermott shifted fluidly between the disparate temperaments.

The first and third movements of Martinu's Piano Quartet are concerto-like in nature, with the strings functioning as a mini ripieno to the piano's wealth of solo material. McDermott soared through it with Lisztian bravura. In the contrasting adagio of the second movement, Kavafian, Tenenbom and Riley spun the sinuous, intertwining themes and counter-melodies with effortless grace.

Dvorak's Piano Quartet, despite its adherence to classical form and structure, is replete with Czech folk idioms. It also featured the program's most gratifying integration of strings and piano.

With so many other endeavors, playing as Opus One is not the primary gig for these musicians. Their relatively infrequent collaboration may be the reason for the concert's freshness. Whatever the cause, the effect was extraordinary: four veteran specialists in close accord, doing what they do best, and having a blast with it.

Eric Haines is a freelance critic for the Post-Gazette.

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