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Piano quartet gives one of the year's best shows

By [Mark Kanny](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC
Wednesday, December 3, 2003

One of the best concerts of the year was given Tuesday night, featuring a wonderful American ensemble that demonstrated the immense rewards to be found right alongside the well-beaten paths of standard repertoire.

The Opus One piano quartet displayed consummate artistry throughout a program of music by Czech composers. The virtually perfect balances throughout the concert, which permits the music to speak and sing naturally, was especially impressive because the group hardly rehearsed with the piano onstage.

The Chamber Music Society's Steinway grand partially decomposed this week, losing its pedals among other appendages. Pianist Anne-Marie McDermott was able to barely acquaint herself with a substitute instrument, and rehearsed only short passages with her colleagues before the concert.

Music for children doesn't often make it to the concert stage, but Antonin Dvorak's Sonatina for Violin and Piano is too good to leave at home. He wrote it during his visit to America that also produced the symphony "From the New World," the "American" string quartet and numerous other masterpieces.



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Dvorak's Sonatina was written for his children with the hope adults would enjoy it too. Tuesday night's performance by Ida Kavafian and McDermott was not only melodically heartwarming; the women brilliantly realized Dvorak's evocative intent, from the rippling broken chords on piano in the slow movement to the energetic folk rhythms. Kavafian's warmth in phrasing and tone were complemented by her agility and power.

Bohuslav Martinu's Piano Quartet was also written in America, after the composer fled his homeland because of Nazi expansionism. He has always been underrated, but his Piano Quartet exemplifies his winning blend of modernist influences of the mid-20th century with his own ties to traditional expression.

The music was premiered in 1942 at Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony's summer home, because its music director, Serge Koussevitzky, was a fan of Martinu. The Piano Quartet begins with fierce angularity, but soon blends lyricism with a less regular version of folk music influence than is found in Dvorak's music. Opus One made the music riveting, with Peter Wiley's introspective slow movement solo a high point.

After intermission, the performers took a brisk view of Dvorak's Piano Quartet in E flat major, a wonderful Brahmsian piece. The rhythmic propulsion was delightful, as was the ease with which tempi were adjusted for broader expression.

McDermott was sensational in a serious way,

by turns bubbling and powerful, and ever sensitive to her colleagues. She relished the way Dvorak puts the pianist in a wonderful harmonic position for the contrasting theme in the third movement, and was beautifully nuanced in the slow movement as well.

Violist Steven Tenenbom, who was on the stage of Carnegie Music Hall in October as a member of the Orion String Quartet, applied his large and well-controlled tone as tightly with the cellist and pianist as with his wife, the violinist.

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