

Music from the heart

Manhattan String Quartet coaches amateurs in Dvorak

By Patricia Goodson

From the sounds of music echoing in all directions on Hybernska Street recently, you might think that a music school had come and set up overnight -- and you would nearly be right.

On Feb. 3 the renowned Manhattan String Quartet (MSQ) began a series of workshops in the Hotel Meteor to coach advanced amateur string players while immersing them in the sights and sounds of the city where Antonin Dvorak lived and worked.

Focusing intensively on a single Dvorak quartet -- Opus 105 in A flat major -- the MSQ will spend two weeks with nearly 100 chamber musicians from all over the United States.

With a slew of accolades from the press ("a national treasure," the Boston Globe wrote), world tours and numerous recordings, the Quartet surprised some with its choice to work with amateurs.

"We have colleagues who turn up their noses at the idea. But this is it for us -- we love the music, the players love the music -- it's collaboration all the way. We get more than we give," violist John Dexter says. "And it is self-selecting. The piece we have chosen is difficult, so people do have to know how to play pretty well."

MSQ violinist Erik Lewis adds: "Our mission from the beginning was to bring music to as many people as possible -- not as an elite activity, but as nourishment for the soul.

"We've played over 1,000 concerts for children, and they have always responded with enthusiasm," Lewis continued. "Kids need good music. They need great music. And we all need to fight against dumbing-down and the tyranny of blind consumerism in modern society."

Each member of the MSQ has a distinct coaching style. Cellist Chris Finckel speaks softly, with constant gentle humor and an encouraging manner. Energetic violinist Calvin Wiersma is usually "on the ceiling" with enthusiasm, says Lewis, who himself has a thoughtful, professorial manner. Violist Dexter, in jeans and running shoes, is constantly up and down, cajoling, prodding, joking. Eyes closed and swaying as if in rapture, he exhorts a violinist to "think of everything in your life that has been beautiful and sweet, and put it into this phrase." She does, and the change is startling. The music soars, no longer bound in black and white on the printed page, but straight from her heart.

Later the Eriksson Quartet, a budding professional group of men in their 20s, tackles the same passage, and the approach is different. “Yes, this passage is beautiful,” Dexter says. “It’s like you’re in love for the first time -- but you’re only 12, you’re not 18. It’s a huge difference. And besides, she doesn’t like you back.”

Most players found out about the workshops by word of mouth. Amateurs have an extensive, tightly knit network and word about special opportunities gets around quickly.

There is even an organization, the Amateur Chamber Music Players, which maintains an international directory with a self-rating system, so that a violinist traveling, say, to Denmark can get together with others at roughly the same level of ability. Some players have used this to hook up with Prague musicians for extracurricular music-making.

The Manhattan String Quartet gives a concert at the House of the Stone Bell, Saturday, Feb. 16, at 8 p.m. Seating is limited.

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