

Artaria Quartet concerts focus on a different nationality each week

By Rob Hubbard

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January's a good month for string quartets. When the landscape is draped with snow and the chill drives us inside, it's a fine time to hear a form in which composers often convey their most intimate ideas and emotions through the intertwining voices of two violins, a viola and a cello.

This month, the Artaria String Quartet is offering a Schubert Club-sponsored string quartet smorgasbord, showing off its facility with a variety of styles and composers. At noon each Thursday in January, the group will tackle works of a different nationality (British, Russian, American and Czech) in the acoustically impressive Courtroom 317 at St. Paul's Landmark Center, combining all four programs into two Minneapolis concerts on Jan. 19 and 20.

Judging from the British program presented on Thursday, Jan. 3, at Landmark Center, the group will be a fine crew to lead listeners on this international sojourn. Performing works by three 20th-century Brits -- Frank Bridge, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten -- the Artaria Quartet displayed exceptional ensemble work and impressive confidence in its interpretations.

The Artaria Quartet let darkness seep to the surface on each piece. Three Divertimenti by Britten were often reminiscent of Dmitri Shostakovich, a brusque, dissonant march giving way to a wistful waltz before a wild Burlesque in which the four musicians made extraordinarily graceful leaps from singing to strumming to plucking to vigorously violent strokes, often within a matter of measures.

The group has been performing Bridge's Second String Quartet since soon after it formed in Boston in 1986, and it showed in the group's assured interplay. Bridge may be thought of as a late romantic, but plenty of contemporary anxiety emerged in this performance, particularly when snatches of phrases were tossed back and forth on the second movement or a mournful mood held sway in the third.

A Vaughan Williams minuet underlined the idea that the Artaria Quartet is likely to give eloquent voice to whatever work it tackles this month.

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Who: The Artaria String Quartet with guest violists Johanna Torbenson and Sabina Thatcher

When, what and where: Noon Thursdays -- Jan. 10 (works by Sergei Prokofiev and Alexander Borodin), Jan. 17 (Charles Ives, Samuel Barber and George Gershwin) and Jan. 24 (Erwin Schulhoff and Antonin Dvorak); Courtroom 317, Landmark Center, 75 W. Fifth St., St. Paul; 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 19 (Prokofiev, Borodin, Schulhoff and Dvorak); and 4 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 20 (Ives, Barber, Bridge, Britten and Gershwin), Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church Gallery, 511 Groveland Ave., Minneapolis

Tickets: Free, information at 651-292-3268 or schubert.org

Capsule: An opportunity to go deep with the string quartet.