

## IVCI, Ensemble host Johannes Quartet

By Tom Aldridge



*The Johannes String Quartet*

A well filled Indiana Landmarks Center's Grand Hall saw Monday's Indianapolis debut of the Philadelphia based [Johannes Quartet](#). In addition, guest speaker and host of APM's *Performance Today*, [Fred Child](#), discussed the two works presented: Bartók's Quartet No. 6 (1939) and Beethoven's Quartet No. 16 in F, Op. 135 (1826). Beethoven's was the last complete work he wrote before his death five months later -- though he afterward recast the final movement of his 13th Quartet, the mighty "Grosse Fuge," into a shorter, lighter movement at his publisher's request. That was his final composition.

Bartók's six quartets are mainstays of 20th century modernism and are challenging for the musical neophyte to follow. Speaking from a small laptop computer, Child discussed each of the No. 6's four movements, giving us played examples before the Johannes group performed the movement in full. The composer began each movement's marking with "Mesto," meaning sad. Child discussed Bartók's bleak state of affairs in 1939, as World War II was commencing, making the point that here was an instance where a composer's music was strongly influenced by ongoing events in his personal life.

Following the same, short motive to open each of the Mestos, Bartók sought variety in the main body of the first three movements: the first - "Mesto. Vivace" or lively; the second - "Mesto. Marcia" i.e. march like; the third - "Mesto. Burletta" a burlesque in which the two violinists play deliberately out of tune; and the fourth merely - "Mesto" or sad throughout. The group, featuring violinists [Soovin Kim](#) (2002 IVCI bronze medalist) and Jessica Lee, violist Choong-Jin Chang and cellist Peter Stumpf, provided a well rehearsed well realized account of this thorny but masterful composition.

By contrast, Beethoven, wracked with GI disorders in his last year, and after writing the greatest, most profound quartet in the literature: No. 14 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131, produced a short, cheery swan song with Op. 135. Appealing to the novice as well as to the learned music lover, it goes several layers deeper than any of his early or middle quartets. Here White discussed two of its movements at a time, showing how Beethoven built an edifice from a germ of an idea in each movement, again with played examples--before each of the two were played in full.

Despite a beautiful account of the hymn-like third movement--another hallmark in Beethoven's late style--the group's playing was either more variable than in the Bartók, or the variability was easier to hear. With an occasionally unmatched ensemble and Kim showing bad intonation at one point, I've heard better performances of Op. 135. But I thought that the addition of Child as narrator gave the concert an interesting plus. Perhaps Child may be thought of as a successor to radio's the late Karl Haas. *Nov. 17;*