

Jay Harvey Upstage

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Montrose Trio, a new group made up of veteran musicians, helps two groups open their seasons



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Out of one of the most accomplished string quartets of the 20th century came the newly minted Montrose Trio, which opened the seasons of two venerable Indianapolis music organizations Wednesday night.

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After 44 years, the originally all-Japanese Tokyo String Quartet disbanded in 2013. The next year, two of its last members — Martin Beaver and Clive Greensmith — decided with the Tokyo's frequent collaborator on piano, Jon Kimura Parker, to form a new piano trio.

To bring the group to Indianapolis so early in its history had something to do with Beaver's status as a laureate in the 1990 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. So the competition, which for many years has also been a concert presenter, teamed up with Ensemble Music Society, whose history is rich in exposing local audiences to the best small ensembles in the world, to get both their seasons off to an excellent start.

The second half of the concert, in the Grand Hall of Indiana Landmarks Center, was devoted to Brahms Trio No. 1 in B major, op. 8. Despite the low opus number, this piece is a notable example of the composer's extreme self-criticism. Brahms' 1889 -90 revision is the version that performers have championed, as it is two-thirds as long as the original and is thus believed to come across better in performance. No one ever faulted Brahms for being too concise.

The Montrose Trio played the work with firm insight into its stirrings of passion, checked by emotional reticence and Brahms' well-practiced formal restraint. The forces gather magisterially in the first movement, which opened with Greensmith's sturdy, soaring cello melody. The overall glum mood of the piece is lightened in the Scherzo, to which the players gave free play. When the Scherzo theme returns after a rustic-flavored trio, it was subtler, as if chastened by the Trio's too explicit sojourn into high spirits.

Balance among the three players was exemplary. The sober cast of the music was confirmed twice at the ends of the middle movements, when the strings held their final notes using no vibrato. The finale displayed a broadly applied magnificence, with something of a dance feeling in its more vigorous portions. Such concentrations of energy were put forth confidently but remained held within the sobriety of the whole work.

More extroverted passion came through in the concert's opening work, the Trio No. 2 in B minor by Joaquin Turina. The outer movements begin slowly, with introductions designed to showcase better the fast music's exuberance. The lyrical import of the Spanish composer's work brought forth nicely arched phrases from the string players. The muted tremolo passages for the strings in the second movement supported the piano's central message well. The finale developed an almost strutting sense of self-possession, even triumph.

As companion in the first half, the Turina's serious yet extroverted mien was balanced by the youthful humor and blithe display of extraordinary skill in the young Beethoven's Trio in E-flat major, op. 1, no. 1. True to this subgenre's conventional designation as "piano trio," Parker's piano was properly the instigator and chief exponent of the work's material.

The Montrose Trio's range of expression allowed it to explore the developing composer's wit and depth. The finale had a chromatic playfulness and a mixture of pauses and brief exchanges reflecting the humor of his short-term teacher Joseph Haydn. (The finale from one of the older master's C-major trios, offered as an encore, confirmed the influence.)

The slow movement's theme foreshadowed a characteristic of Beethoven in a lyrical mood, with signs of hesitation in the first part of the theme yielding to more flowing material. A classic instance of this is the quartet "Mir ist so wunderbar" from "Fidelio." Melodies came hard to Beethoven, as scholars have found from study of his sketchbooks, and it may be a psychological reflection of this that many of his tunes begin with an oddly beguiling tentativeness.

This quirk is well-reflected in the B major trio's slow movement, but the piece's superior appeal lies in its untroubled panache, which the Montrose Trio fully projected. And its droll touches were particularly natural to Parker, whose many achievements on his own include collaboration with Peter Schickele on the P.D.Q. Bach concoction Concerto for Two Pianos vs. Orchestra, with its punning movement titles "Shake allegro," "Andante alighieri," and "Presto chango."