

Jay Harvey Upstage

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Gold medalist Kelemen brings his award-winning string quartet to Indiana Landmarks Center



Laszlo Fenjo, Katalin Kokas, Barnabas Kelemen, and Gabor Homoky

Barnabas Kelemen seemed fully formed as a musician when he won the top prize in the 2002 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. There was more than the steely confidence and technical polish of a competition winner to his playing — a quality more settled, more mature, more ready for the world than even a few other IVCI gold medalists I can recall.

So it's not surprising that he should have put together five years ago a string quartet that has quickly gained acclaim and stature among the younger such groups on the international scene.

On Tuesday night the [Kelemen Quartet](#) appeared at Indiana Landmarks Center under the joint auspices of the Ensemble Music Society and the IVCI. The program drew heavily on the Hungarian origin of the ensemble, after opening with a late quartet by Joseph Haydn.

For that piece, Kelemen's wife, Katalin Kokas, played second violin; for pieces by Gyorgy Kurtag and Bela Bartok, she played viola, exchanging places with violinist-violist Gabor Homoky. The group also includes cellist Laszlo Fenyo. Haydn's Quartet in D minor, op. 76, no. 2, carries the nickname "Quinten" because of its thoroughgoing use of a motif of falling fifths. The historically defining interval makes its presence in a composition both easy to pick out and fit for all kinds of disguises, and Haydn was a clever enough composer to cover the whole range.

The Kelemen Quartet performed it with well-judged phrasing and precision in negotiating the wit and surprises characteristic of the Austrian composer, especially with regard to sudden changes of tempo, tense pauses, and dynamic variety, which was particularly well brought off in the second movement. Articulation was well-matched, too, especially in the extensive staccato demands of that movement.

The rustic charm of the Minuet came through splendidly, and the spirited finale had the kind of grandeur, never overbearing, that we find in Haydn's "London" symphonies. The Kelemen ensemble can speak with a mighty voice when required, but also masters fragmentary, irresolute, and wispy music just as well, as the concert's one 21st-century piece showed.

Kurtag, who will turn 90 next year, is Hungary's most eminent living composer. His "Six Moments Musicaux," op. 44, brought the concert up to intermission. These pieces cover a wide variety of the expressive possibilities of atonal composition in its later generations. Not privileging a tonal center does not mean giving up on music's age-old fitness for all sorts of thoughts and emotions, and the Kelemen Quartet proceeded to demonstrate that fact.

"Footfalls" seemed appropriate for the Halloween season, as the title indicated that looking back over your shoulder upon hearing such steps can be represented in music all its own. The fourth miniature, in memory of pianist Gyorgy Sebok (a favorite duo partner of the late cellist Janos Starker), was a brooding lamentation that gradually thinned out, holding on phrase by phrase as if to indicate how tenuous even desirable memories can be.

After the Kurtag, Bartok's String Quartet No. 5 had the substantial familiarity of settled law, musically speaking. The broad-based opening movement allowed the Kelemen to reach the heights of sustained energy. In the "night music" movements (2 and 4), the players attention to the dim palette of colors was acute. They also brought out the movements' contrasting atmospheres: the second movement's sense that the nighttime is being sensed by an alert, wakeful person, in contrast to the fourth movement's eerie suggestion of shifting dream states.

The finale had a breadth that matched the opener, and then some. It galloped furiously at times, but would check itself expertly in the Kelemen's performance to delve into other moods and speeds. "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is," one of Noel Coward's characters exclaims, and that's how I felt about the wry evocation of Hungarian cafe bands in a sentimental tune just before the end. The tune remained cheap, but somehow exalted by its surroundings. On balance, the Bartok Fifth is anything but cheap music, and the Kelemen Quartet played it with no quibbling as to its lofty stature among 20th-century string quartets.