

Steven White's review of the Audubon Quartet's final performance

Steven White, Metropolitan Opera conductor and artistic advisor for Opera Roanoke, has sent in this review of the Audubon Quartet's final performance, which took place Monday, Aug. 8 at the Chautauqua Institution in New York. I'm grateful to share Steven's take on the concert here. Read on:



The Audubon Quartet: Ellen Jewett, Akemi Takayama, Doris Lederer, Tom Shaw

I would not even attempt to count the number of public musical events I've attended over the nearly five decades of my life. Yet I can easily enumerate on one hand the concerts at which I have witnessed significant history being made. Such was the occasion this past Monday afternoon at the Chautauqua Institution in western New York State, when four brilliant musicians performed for the final time as the Audubon Quartet.

Though they've been in residence for a number of years at Shenandoah Conservatory in Winchester, it was their tenure at Virginia Tech (1979 – 2001) that solidified the string ensemble's bond with Southwest Virginia. That connection has remained strong, due in no small part to our local public's frequent encounters with violinist Akemi Takayama, the rightly beloved concertmaster of the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra.

As I took my seat among the hundreds of others who had traveled from all over the country to attend this last-in-a-lifetime event, I was curious to see how these musicians would balance the normal demands of music-making with the bitter-sweet emotional weight of the moment. After all, one would think it might prove difficult to read music through tears. Surely some technical or expressive aspect of the performance might, understandably, suffer.

There was no suffering. From beginning to end there was only humbling testimony to the selfless individualism that most characteristically defines the concept of musical ensemble. Their obvious affection for each other was channeled efficiently and joyously into music-making of the highest caliber.

Their program of music by Antonin Dvorak was unpretentious yet perfectly appropriate. Nearly all of Dvorak's music has a discernable tint of nostalgia, none more so than the five chosen movements from *Cypresses* that constituted the first half. In the opening movement, "When Thy Sweet Glances Fall on Me," violinists Takayama and Ellen Jewett rendered the tender opening phrase with startling beauty and unanimity of expression, setting a tone of artistic solidarity that was evident throughout the evening.

Violist Doris Lederer played with lyric warmth the touching melody in "The Old Letter in My Book." Sitting next to her on stage was her husband, cellist Thomas Shaw, a founding member of the quartet, whose playing throughout the entire concert provided a resonant platform as steady as an oak tree.

For the second half the quartet was joined by violist and former Audubon member David Salness for a sparkling performance of the so-called "American" Quintet, Op. 97. Composed in 1893 while Dvorak was residing in Spillville, Iowa, it is music that intoxicates with a mixture of Bohemian and American folk-idioms, much like the *New World Symphony*. Yet it is also music that, not unlike early-autumn sunlight, radiates a unique joy made more poignant by temporal awareness. It was serendipitously appropriate for the occasion of this concert.

Dvorak was himself a violist, so it comes as no surprise that he would demonstrate a particular affinity for low string writing. In Monday's performance, cellist Shaw and violinists Lederer and Salness all three seemed to relish their special confederation, delineating numerous details of technique and phrasing with utmost clarity.

Cleanliness and passion don't always necessarily go hand in hand, yet those are but two of the qualities that always seem to characterize Takayama's violin playing. Such was certainly the case in this performance, most particularly in the outer fast movements, where her rhythmic precision and vibrancy of tone were galvanizing.

I was struck, too, by the integrity and immediately appealing sound of Jewett's violin. There is a perfectly modulated subtlety to her playing that communicates vastly more than the deliberate extroversion of many other performers.

Perhaps the most distinguished aspect of the entire performance was the mutual intuition that regulated and guided the rise and fall of the musical phrases. Much like a flock of birds moving effortlessly in formation, the ensemble navigated the gorgeously expressive atmosphere of the music with an unforced confidence that I have rarely witnessed. It was the product of personal and artistic relationships that have been cultivated for years.

The audience cheered and cheered at the end, as well they should have. I was so immeasurably elated that these hundreds of people in attendance had been moved, not by glitzy gimmickry of any kind, but by the privileged experience of listening intently to a sincere and loving conversation among friends whose commitment to beauty and excellence had resulted in an inexpressibly pleasant sum far greater than its parts.

For thirty-seven years the Audubon Quartet has courageously demonstrated that some of humanity's most humanizing ideas can be articulated on sixteen strings. They've lived, worked, and made music among us, improving our lives as they sought the fulfillment of their own. May the measure of our gratitude reflect the magnitude of their gift.

Steven White is on the conducting staff at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He serves as Artistic Adviser for Opera Roanoke



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