



Review: Pacifica Quartet Pacifica dives deep into Beethoven

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It's long been a wry joke among those who work the waters of the Pacific Ocean on boats and ships that there's nothing the least bit pacific about it. The world's largest body of water is tumultuous and daunting, its waves large and violent, its storms deadly.

You could also say that the Pacifica Quartet bears an inapt moniker, one they chose when they formed 16 years ago in California. Like the ocean that originally inspired them, this string quartet's interpretations are deep, vast and full of fury.

On Saturday, the group continued its three-year commitment to performing all 17 of Ludwig van Beethoven's string quartets at St. Paul's intimate St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ. It proved to be one of those exceptional concerts that reinforced how exciting the experience of live performance can be.

One of the Pacifica Quartet's greatest assets is its transparency: With their physicality, use of eye contact and subtle gestures, they invite the audience into their interpretations, making them feel a part of the process. They've developed a great gift for bringing out the music's drama without being excessively showy.

Saturday's program featured one of Beethoven's earliest quartets and one of his last. In the Quartet in F, Op. 18, No. 1, the group quickly brought out the influences of the composer's mentor, Joseph Haydn, on a playful first movement. But soon sadness emerged on the Adagio, and so did the foursome's flair for building tension with the skill of an absorbing storyteller. They used silences to draw audience members to seat's edge and keep them frozen there, afraid to move for fear of causing a creak.

If the Op. 18 collection of quartets show a Beethoven looking backward, the Op. 130 "Liebquartett" is decidedly forward looking. In fact, one hearing its "Grosse Fuge" finale for the first time could easily mistake it for a 20th-century piece with its jarring intensity, aggressiveness and periodic dissonance. It's one of the most demanding works Beethoven ever created, and the Pacifica Quartet delved intrepidly into its depths, bringing all of the works' emotional and musical complexity to the surface. The group performs three more Beethoven quartets this afternoon, returning next season to complete the cycle.

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