The Chautauqua Daily

Chautauqua, New York
17 August 2015

PUBLIQuartet remixes string quartet for the future

By Morgan Kinney

A few years ago, a string quartet sat in a practice room workshopping a piece by Alfred Schnittke. Soon enough, cellist Amanda Gookin said, the group started a jam session that mashed Schnittke and Haydn together. It was then that PUBLIQuartet came to fruition in earnest.

“That specific moment was when we really decided this is something really cool,” Gookin said. “This is something very different — let’s just do more.”

Gookin and the rest of PUBLIQuartet take the stage at 4 p.m. today in Elizabeth S. Lenna Hall as part of the Logan Chamber Music Series. While the string quartet maintains standard instrumentation — two violins, a viola and a cello — its repertoire spans from traditional to contemporary, often blending the two as the group sees fit.

PUBLIQuartet’s mandate is in the name — to serve the public. This manifests itself in how the group performs, where it welcomes audience interaction and participation, Gookin said. After all, improvisation is a huge part of the group’s style, she said, which is context-dependent.

Gookin also pointed to the quartet’s PUBLIQ Access initiative, which puts out a call for scores from emerging composers to both jumpstart careers and provide the quartet with ample new repertoire.

Jannina Norpoth, the group’s violinist, said their most recent call received more than 130 submissions that they had to narrow to about five. PUBLIQuartet showcases the winners’ work in free, public concerts.

The group doesn’t turn its back on more traditional composers out of lack of respect, Norpoth said. Rather, she points out how much the Mozarts and Bachs of the world failed to explore.

“There’s a lot more sounds strings are capable of, and that’s part of the music that we’re playing — music that encompasses many different colors and techniques,” Norpoth said.

Gookin agreed and said their efforts to push boundaries are punctuated with standards like Haydn; PUBLIQuartet is not only about improv and electroacoustic fare. Besides, she said, taking chances has historically led to the occasional success story.

“If people didn’t take a chance on Beethoven, maybe he wouldn’t be on every major philharmonic roster every season,” Gookin said. “In our effort to play the music that’s happening today, we’re contributing to the continuation of classical music in the future.”

And, she said, the group shares that commitment to be at the musical frontier.

“The four of us are really all so different, and yet we all share this common goal of wanting our music to be part of the future, of being creative, and to break some boundaries,” Gookin said.

With tradition cast aside, the group said it is free to do as it pleases. Instead of playing someone else’s music, they play something that is their own, providing a personal touch that made it only natural that their upcoming debut album be self-titled.

This independence is ultimately what makes the group so productive and its work so exciting, Gookin said.

“When people come forth with ideas, it can be anything,” she said. “We have to all exercise acceptance and openness and patience, and it goes beyond whether we want to choose Mozart and Haydn with Bartók and Ligeti. It’s, ‘I have this crazy idea, this crazy piece I want to write. Let’s work on it together.’”