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Emotionality of Merling Trio is Hallmark of chamber festival concert

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By Brad Aspey

Some musicians seem content to steep themselves in technique while allowing feeling and sentiment to come and go indiscriminately in their presentation.

It is clear, however, that the members of the Merling trio make emotion part of their daily practice.

Throughout Thursday night's recital by the trio for Saugatuck's chamber music festival, it seemed as though each performer was reading the composers feelings along what the notes on the printed scores. In fact, the impression was given that the heart of each piece on the program supported the technical execution, and not the other way around.

That quality is surprisingly rare in music performance.

Smiles all around

Several times during the recital, a member of the trio would make eye contact with another and draw a smile from that colleague. It happened often enough to lead one to conclude that the trio most likely plans for these exchanges to occur.

Even if it was a drill, it never seemed contrived or insincere. The Merling Trio successfully captured the lush yearning of Brahms and the ethereal floating of contemporary composer Terry Winter Owens.

The trio also made the utmost of the distinct occasions and moments, which Mozart effectively used to fasten his musical works together.

New York's Owens is an internationally published composer whose contribution to Thursday's Saugatuck recital was written specifically for the Merling Trio. The works title, "The Pure Space Into Which Flowers Endlessly Open," comes from poet Rainer Maria Rilke's "Eighth Elegy."

Poetry in emotion

Three poems, one by Rilke and two by the composer, are read during the piece by the Merling's members. The effect was spine tingling and, even though the text was read and not sung, quite musical. It is surprising to know that the instruments in which Owens specializes in playing are the piano and harpsichord, since her writing for the violin was the most natural sounding.

The trio's spoken delivery of the poetry reflected the group's dedication to filling every performance with emotion. This trait helps make the Merling Trio most at home with the heavily romantic music by Johannes Brahms.

The draw of Romance

In fact, during the Mozart Trio K. 496, the trio members sometimes sounded as if they were being drawn away from this composer's Classical crispness toward the impassioned Romantic literature.

The trio's leaning in this direction, however, wonderfully served the performance of their encore for the evening's program, which was a brief and brilliant piano trio by Liszt.