

Classical musical at the Cohen

# Bartok Quartet- Budapest to Beethoven

by Eric Simpson

Hungary, home of goulash and rhapsodies, has been removed from the gaze of the Western world since its incorporation into the Eastern Bloc Communist community. Not long ago Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its inhabitants were considered an aristocratic people: proud but poor, hot-blooded but sentimental. From Franz Liszt's piano to the rousing sound of the gypsies' violin, Hungary had a spirited musical tradition.

On Friday, Feb. 16, the performance of the Bartok Quartet, formed in Budapest 22 years ago, demonstrated that at least one chamber music ensemble from Hungary has preserved the tradition of unrestrained musical expression and combined it with an evident dedication to technical perfection.

Seated in a small semi-circle

on the bare, starkly-lit Rebecca Cohn Auditorium stage, the Bartok Quartet performed three contrasting compositions with intensity and precision. The austere setting seemed to emphasize the clarity and tone of the music.

The concert, which included works by Beethoven, Brahms and Bartok, was a demanding exposition of the classical tradition as complex themes were expressed through flawlessly performed melodies and refrains. However the mood and color of the works were never neglected in favour of technical skill.

The group exhibited a knowledge of the music and each other that has evidently resulted from 22 years of playing together.

Beethoven's Quartet in F minor, Opus 95, in five movements was crisp and bold, moving with determina-

tion through changes of melody and tempo to a powerful climax. None of the instruments faded; each kept its own distinct voice as the delicate balance of the work was maintained.

The Larghetto espressivo contained the only indication of melancholy in the piece and the viola brought across this shade of emotion, rare in Beethoven, with particular grace. The allegro vivace and the allegro agitato set the dominant tempo of the work and the striking flourish of the final allegro gave the piece a distinctive Beethoven flavour.

The Bartok Quartet's recording of Beethoven's complete quartets has been cited as one of the greatest recordings of the last quarter century.

In addition to their many records, the Bartok Quartet has received countless awards and international prizes. They

have toured extensively throughout the communist and non-communist world. They have given a total of 2000 concerts since their inception in 1957.

Their appearance in Halifax was the first by the group to Atlantic Canada and their last stop on a six week North American tour. The quartet spends four months of the year on the road.

"We found the Halifax audience extremely receptive and the hall was a joy to perform in. The resonance and acoustics were outstanding," Peter Komlos, first violinist, remarked after the performance.

"Our tour was tiring at the end; we played on nine out of the last ten nights."

The second work on the programme was the Brahms Quartet in C Minor, Opus 51, in four movements. This piece was tinged with mystery and romance and filled with languorous tones. The second movement, Romanze poco adagio, was intriguingly sad as the theme moved from instrument to instrument. The typically lilting Brahms melody created a soft mood that seemed to lead aimlessly on and on... music for the escapist.

The final composition was Bartok's Quartet No. 5 (1934) in five movements, a modern work of control and abandon. This Hungarian composer incorporated turmoil and tension, pathos and frenzy into a complex structure of often dischordant sounds. The first

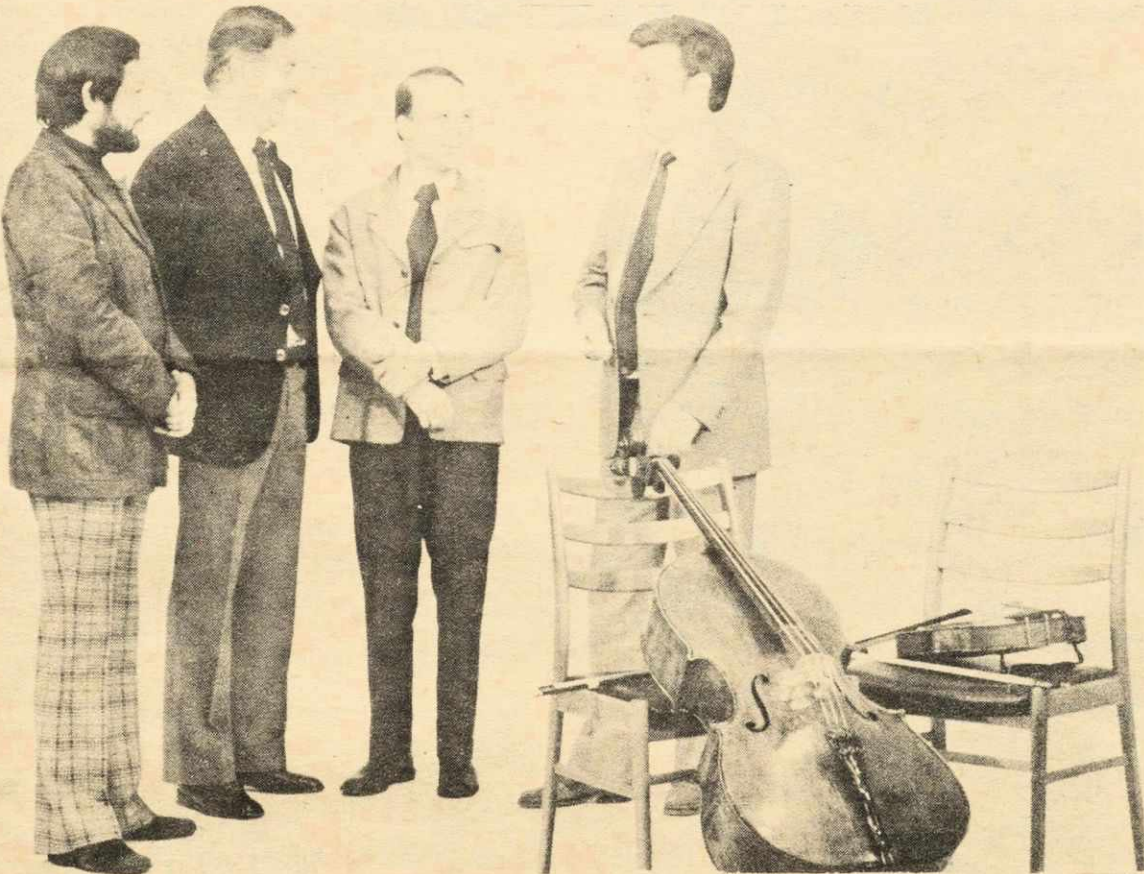
movement began with a series of tortured, torn notes that pierced the air and attacked the listeners. Gradually the second movement introduced a slow, eerie theme that built up to a vortex of swirling music. This modern mixture of sounds was often on the verge of producing a harsh effect yet Bartok took contrasts to an extreme and built a powerful and haunting composition.

The third movement, scherzo alla bulgarese, was a more mellow, finally melting away leaving the listener hanging breathless. The presto finale was almost mocking in tone as the cello and viola plucked their strings and tapped their frets bringing an end to this brilliant, disturbing piece of unorthodox music.

The audience's response was enthusiastic and the group played a short encore, the Scherzo from Schubert's the Water Maiden. It was tastefully performed although less satisfying than the three previous works.

As the Bartok Quartet showed in this concert, strict concentration on musicianship does not necessarily cause a lack of sensitive interpretation. The music of the Bartok Quartet exemplifies the triumph of classical music: the expression of spirit through discipline and structure.

Although the drastic change in political regimes has effected the Hungarian way of life, freedom of expression achieved through classical music appears to have remained intact.



The Bartok Quartet (right to right) Peter Kompos, Sandor Devich, Geza Nemeth, Laszlo Mezo.

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