

Interview New Music Quartet – Katarzyna Gluza (violin), Paulina Marcisz (violin), Karalina Orsik-Sauter (viola), Dominika Szczypka (violoncello)
By Cecilia Oinas

Cecilia (C): Congratulations on winning the special prize in the category string quartet of the FS&MM competition! What are your feelings at the moment?

Katarzyna: We are proud to have reached this point. The competitions are great ways to mobilize us and are opportunities to work on new repertoire. This is even more important when you are not a student anymore. We are glad we received the prize with financial support, which will help us with further musical development.

C: How did you end up together as a quartet?

Dominika: Our quartet was created at the Academy of Music in Bydgoszcz two years ago. One day, Karalina, our violist, came to me and mentioned that she would like to play in a string quartet. I agreed to play with her and we started looking for violinists. It was difficult to find two persons who would be both ready to be involved 100% and think about music in a similar way. But it happened when Katarzyna and Paulina joined us. We are different, but we enjoy playing together. I think it is the most important thing.

C: How did you decide to participate in this particular competition?

Karalina: Because we have worked without a teacher since the beginning, we plan our artistic activities ourselves by taking part in various music festivals and competitions. This competition motivated our quartet in a very exceptional way: we could extend our repertoire, with a specific goal in mind and be able to demonstrate our skills. Taking part in such a prestigious event is already a great success and we are very happy that we decided to participate in this competition.

C: Could you describe to us what happens in the studio when you have a rehearsal session? Do you always agree with each other or do you rather disagree? Do you let the ideas be decided while playing through the pieces?

Katarzyna: Our working style is very specific: we live in different cities, which makes our rehearsals logistically complicated. When we finally meet in one city, we stay there for four or five days. Usually we play the whole day, which is very demanding. After such a working session we either have concerts, recordings or competitions so we usually work under pressure. It requires good social skills when we spend time together so intensively. You need to know and understand each other very well. With four girls, it can become even more complicated!

Fortunately, we share similar musical tastes and sensitivity. We admire the same quartets and recordings. When we start to work on the piece, we listen to a lot of recordings and try to find an interpretation, which we all find beautiful. This helps us find our own way of playing the piece. Of course, we may also disagree about musical ideas but usually they are settled quite quickly.

C: Is there such a thing as an ideal string quartet sound? Do you aim for this kind of sound, or does it always depend on the piece?

Katarzyna: It is impossible to find one type of sound from which to play quartets from different periods. We are trying to be as faithful to the composer as possible. For example, we aspire to play works from the classical period with a historically informed performance practice approach.

I don't think there is something like an ideal string quartet sound. For me, one of the greatest things is variety. The sound can be strange, interesting, beautiful, yet it can never be perfect. That is why art is so addictive. Each person is different. When somebody plays, through his or her playing you can receive their emotions and life experiences. And in the quartet, we already have four individuals. Each person has their own voice, but you also need to blend your voice with those of your partners. It is a combination of blending in, supporting or sometimes arguing against each other. For me, quartet playing is one of the strongest mediums of human thoughts and emotions.

C: Let's move now to the program from the competition. It was a delight to hear Haydn's quartet (Op. 33 No. 5 in G major), which was full of joy, wittiness and beauty.

Katarzyna: Thank you very much. For us, the best reward is when the audience is able follow our emotions and experience through the music we play. The G-major Quartet Op. 33 no. 5 by Haydn is a very interesting and versatile piece. It was great fun to search for the characters the composers included within the quartet. In Haydn, you can never be sure what will happen next. For example, in the beginning of the first movement we can already hear the end. And then, after two bars you encounter the first surprise. Haydn is very generous with surprises in this work. The second movement is very lyrical, sometimes even tragic, although only a little. The third movement is a joke. You can hear it very easily. There are many unexpected twists. We were trying to achieve this effect as we wouldn't know where the music will lead us. The fourth movement is like a Renaissance dance, very light and gentle. It is a movement where every player can shine like a real virtuoso! The movement ends with a crazy presto passage, which is a great summary of this musical firework.

C: You had a lot of Polish music in your program. You ended the second round with Andrzej Panufnik's quartet "Paper cuts from 1990" which was a beautiful way to end the otherwise more virtuosic program. What I admired in your quartet playing is that you seem to have the same level of emotional engagement, and the music becomes so beautiful that one loses track of time and place.

Karalina: Thank you very much for your beautiful words. We are very happy that the emotions we put into our playing were perceived in such a way. We are a Polish quartet, and therefore Polish music is very important to us. Participating in international music events is always an opportunity to present Polish music to a wider audience. We can actually say that the promotion of Polish music is our mission. That's why we decided to include quartets of Szymanowski, Panufnik and Lutoslawski in the competition repertoire.

Panufnik's third quartet was inspired by the rustic art of Poland – especially the paper cutting (Wycinanki). Wanting to transform the geometric structures in the sound, Panufnik envisioned five paper-cuts from various parts of Poland that are related to one another. On this basis, a five-part work was created in which each part is testing different aspects of quartet-playing skills: the volume control, rhythmical flexibility, variety of pizzicato playing, power, and technical brilliance.

This work is not performed that often, not even in Poland. However, each time when we have played it, it has been received extremely warmly. We hope that Panufnik's third quartet will eventually be included in other ensembles' repertoire as well.

C: Finally, let's talk about Schubert. You played the first two movements from "Der Tod und das Mädchen". What do you find most difficult about this work?

Katarzyna: The greatest difficulty is, most of all, that everybody already knows it and has expectations as to how it should sound. It is such a legendary chamber music piece. There is almost a sacral respect for this quartet within the chamber music community, which of course is totally justified: it is not only one of the greatest pieces of chamber music, it is one of the greatest works in the history of music, but in the history of music in general. The first difficulty was how to start. We did not feel worthy enough to play such a masterpiece. Luckily, we soon overcame our doubts and started to work.

For me the greatest challenge in "Der Tod und das Mädchen" is that because the piece is so emotional and so beautiful, I can easily burst into tears while playing it. Especially the second movement. It is hard to connect pure delight with cold calculation of what is going on, to keep in mind the tempo and the complex structure of the piece. Also, although in the first movement there is only one tempo mark, it does not mean that the movement should be played in one tempo, as it rather depends on the atmosphere of a specific part. In addition, how to make smooth transitions between different parts is one of the biggest problems you have to solve in this piece.

C: And one last question: what are your future plans?

Dominika: We hope that we will play a lot of concerts in Poland and abroad in the future. At the moment, we are preparing ourselves for the Karol Szymanowski International Music Competition in Katowice, which will be organized in September 2018. But I think it will not be our last competition... We are also very happy because we got a scholarship from the Ministry of Polish Culture and National Heritage.

We hope to begin studies in Escuela Superior de Musica Reina Sofia under the guidance of Günter Pichler. We were invited to take part in many festivals and concerts, for example: Bordeaux Festival (May 2018), Davos Festival in Switzerland (August 2018), La Dimore del Quartetto and Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Italy (June 2018) and many others. Besides competitions and concerts, we will do a recording of works by Karol Szymanowski and Krzysztof Penderecki. We would like to raise international awareness of the role of Polish composers' works, something that is so important in our culture.

C: Thank you very much for this interview!