

Interview Simply Quartet – Danfeng Shen (violin), Wenting Zhang (violin), Xiang Lyu (viola), Ivan Valentin Hollup Roald (violoncello)
by Cecilia Oinas in February 2018

Cecilia (C): Congratulations on winning the 1st prize in the category string quartet of the Franz Schubert and Modern Music competition! Could you reflect a little on your feelings at the moment?

Ivan: I mean, every time it is a huge crescendo. When you are in the competition, it's like you are in a bubble but at some point, I start to look at getting out of it (laugh), and maybe having a beer and having good time. But when you are finished you are actually so tired you don't want to do anything.

C: You have already won many prestigious competitions in the past year, such as the Haydn and the Hong Kong competition. How did you decide to participate in this particular competition?

Xiang: We did a competition last year in Vienna, which we also won. But after that we wanted to learn new pieces. Last year we worked very hard with the previous repertoire and wanted some fresh air, new pieces to work with. Then we saw the Schubert and Modern Music competition announcement and thought it would be the best way to motivate us to learn new repertoire. We had our motivation. And we also got a chance to play two Schubert quartets, which felt like a dream come true.

C: I really enjoyed your Schubert playing in the finals. I particularly admired how everything was very balanced and that the music was always goal-oriented, yet you also managed to have time for beautiful moments.

Ivan: The way you described it sounds like the character of Schubert's Death and the Maiden. Death is her destiny, but the image of the girl, the maiden, how she is struggling for life... We tried to depict these contrasts in our playing.

C: Is there such a thing as an ideal string quartet sound? Or does it always depend on the piece?

Xiang: I think each group has their personal sound. Of course, every piece we work on has its different sounds, sonorities and timbres, but I'd like to try to find an even more personal sound for our quartet.

C: I also noticed that you have organized alternative concepts to reach a broader audience. For example, you have had a concert with a beat boxer. This sounds awesome! Could you tell me more about this?

Ivan: Robeat (the beatboxer Robert Wolf) was really like a virtuoso with his voice, mouth, and microphone.

Xiang: Before I met Robeat, I thought our first violinist (Danfeng) was the virtuoso (laughs)!

C: So you played some Mozart together with Robeat?

Ivan: Yes, Mozart and Bach. He improvised over the music, and every time in a different way! The audience went crazy. I mean, we have never received this kind of introduction applause before.

Xiang: I think it was the first time for me to play in a concert venue that felt like a stadium concert. We were a bit worried before the concert though, since we had never tried a concept like this before. But after we met him, we thought: of course, pop music, modern music, each kind of music, they have different characters, but you can still create bridges and combine different styles.

Ivan: His style and influence comes from pop music where the rhythm (tempo) is somewhat stricter, probably because he uses his body and voice, but we found that he actually was quite flexible. It also inspired our ear. Just like when we first rehearsed Schubert and then Dutilleux for the competition, it changed the way how we listened to the pieces. Of course, we still pay attention to the style, the music theory rules – although it is not a very good word for that – the aesthetics, the gestures of classical music, but there are always other styles that may inspire us as well.

C: I was also pleased that you had Schumann's quartet (Op. 41 No. 3) in your program. For some reason, I find quartets don't play Schumann as much as they could. What do you think are the reasons behind that?

Ivan: For me, there are at least two reasons: first, sometimes you really find quite pianistically-influenced writing in his quartets. For example, in the first movement you have that offbeat section, which is just so much easier on the piano. When you do it with four people it is not the same...it is just a lot more work. There is sometimes depth and sometimes craziness. Maybe that is the second challenge.

C: And it is not the kind of "brilliant" music. Schumann's music is very deep and there is always an abundance of performance markings, which you need to get through.

Ivan: Yes, and sometimes very sudden changes.

Xian: In the Schumann quartets, there are so many different characters you have to play in a relatively short time.

Ivan: And the changes are not so clear in a classical way, but sometimes quite hidden.

C: How would you describe the biggest difference when playing Schubert or Schumann, for instance?

Ivan: For me the difference is regarding the structure. Because Schubert is still in a way more vertical. With Schumann, when you look at the music, it may seem vertical, but it is not.

Xian: In my view, the difference between Schubert and Schumann is the way they present characters.

C: And finally, what are your future plans?

Wenting: This year we will have some concerts, i.e. in China, and a little break from competitions. We had such intensive preparation for this competition, so now we can learn new pieces.

C: Thank you very much for this nice conversation and all the best!