

Tomorrow Anne Madden interprets the aurora borealis

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The Arts

A Spanish string sensation



String quartet the Cuarteto Casals are breaking the Spanish musical mould in more ways than one, writes Michael Dervan

It's all got a kind of familiar ring to it. A group of musicians form a string quartet while they're still at college. After a few years they start winning top prizes at international competitions. Their career takes off. They get a recording contract, good reviews, and the major international engagements start rolling in.

However, in the case of Barcelona-based string quartet the Cuarteto Casals, who are coming to the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, this is actually a most unusual story. Spain has not exactly been renowned for its string quartets, its string players, or even for the quality of its music-education system.

Enter Paloma O'Shea, patron of the arts, wife of the billionaire banker Emilio Botín, and founder of the Santander Piano Competition, whose laureates in the 1980s included both Barry Douglas and Hugh Tinney.

She founded the competition in 1972, and two decades on used her connections and clout to set up the privately-funded Reina Sofia School of Music in Madrid in 1991. The school was founded to sidestep the parochialism of Spain's professional music training.

Talking to the members of the quartet in their airy first-floor rehearsal studio in a Temple Bar-like setting off the Travessera de Gràcia in Barcelona, I mentioned a 1990s article from the *Strad* magazine about how terrible string teaching was in Spain. "It was, it was," they chorused in response.

"There was no tradition in normal schools to have good teachers," explains cellist Arnau Tomàs Realp. "The Reina Sofia School changed the dynamic. Now in other schools, they have made a lot of changes, and things are improving. For example, we are now teaching here in Barcelona. When I was young it was not possible to find any quartet of a good level who could teach you chamber music. The first thing I had to do was to go abroad, or to Madrid, to the Reina Sofia School. These were the only options."

The Reina Sofia School brought some of the greatest players and teachers from around the world to Madrid, and provided a valuable shock to the existing conservatories, where it was most unusual to find foreigners on the staff. Paloma O'Shea, who as her name suggests is of Irish descent, was friendly with the likes of Rostropovich, and he was among the people whose advice she sought on hiring teachers for the school. On a practical level, the Cuarteto Casals is living proof of how well the formula worked. The group, which was founded in 1997, won competitions in London (2000) and Hamburg (2002), and has become the first Spanish chamber ensemble to establish itself with a reputation at the highest international level.

As students, of course, the young players weren't exactly thinking that far ahead. But they seemed to have known that chamber music was where their future lay. The two violinists, Vera Martínez Mehner and Abel Tomàs Realp, didn't cherish ambitions to be soloists. They were 18 and 16 when the quartet was founded, and chamber music, they discovered, was just right for them.

Viola player Jonathan Brown, who has been with the group for five years, didn't originally go to college to study music. But "the viola came along" and as a viola player he realised that chamber music was what he wanted to do. Playing in a string quartet was the obvious destiny, because "there's nothing like the string-quartet repertoire for the breath and depth that it offers".

The developments in teaching have paralleled in other areas of Spanish musical life. The support structures for career development are good. "I'm one of the people who has had the most scholarships in the world," says Arnau. "I've lived, like, 12 years from scholarships. They make a lot of jokes about it in my house."

"There are new concert halls and new chamber series all over the place," explains Brown, "in Barcelona, Girona, Val-



adolid, León, Leida, Valencia has a new orchestra." Back in the early days, jokes Martínez Mehner, it looked as if it would take "a miracle" for them to succeed. "We knew what we wanted to invest in this project. It was very difficult at the beginning, because all the doors were closed to us. There was no tradition for a string quartet, especially one with Spanish people playing. We spent a year together in Madrid, and then we went to Germany. Once we were in a culture where there were more string quartets, where there was a tradition, you could get to know very good teachers, find out what was happening in this world and where the competitions were, and we got in there and everything began to move.

Then, when we came back to Spain, doors started opening."

It's a process that's not unique to Spain, they say. They played in Vienna recently, and were told that if you're Viennese you have to go away first in order to become famous in Vienna.

Late-comer Brown remarks on the players' dedication and commitment to making a success of the group. "I wasn't there, but I understand that from the beginning no one was interested in doing the quartet half-way. It was either doing it all the way - it's going to be a successful, professional quartet - or we'll work on other projects. Which is not common. A lot of young quartets start with good ideas and stars in their eyes, but don't nec-

Taking a bow: The Cuarteto Casals are, left to right, Jonathan Brown, Abel Tomàs Realp, Arnau Tomàs Realp and Vera Martínez Mehner. Photograph: Luis Montesdeoca Domínguez

essarily have the same at the end." There were plenty of sacrifices along the way. "The worst of the suffering was before my time," laughs Brown. "There was still a little after I joined, but they endured most of it before me." Nowadays, the quartet is a very democratic institution. "We have a relatively sophisticated language and system of checks and balances," says Brown. "We're not a quartet that yells at each other and throws things and cries. There are quartets that do, and thankfully we're not one of them."

"We divide up the rehearsal time so that each person will have a block of time to work on what they really want to. Each person has to have their own list of priorities, what they want to fix in any particu-

lar section of music. With a quartet, the work never ends. If you wanted to, you could spend years working on one movement and it still wouldn't really be quote, unquote, perfect." No one has to fight for time or for their voice to be heard. And they arbitrate on differences over phrasing, fingerings and bowings - matters to get string players hot under the collar - by having one member listen without looking, to make sure the differences are actually both audible and significant. The idea, they explain, is to find a way of getting rid of the multitude of musicians' personal biases that the listener can't actually hear objectively.

In spite of the meticulous approach to preparation, they like to remain open to gestures of spontaneity in performance. "Everything you do needs to be adjusted on the basis of hearing and intuition. You can have too much thinking, too much talking, too much analysing," says Arnau. And unplanned things to happen on the spur of the moment in concerts, "preferably not too many, but..."

Like most musicians, they declare themselves focused on working out the composers' intentions. But even here, they're not closed to intuitive responses that can't be fully explained. "There are certain things that you can't articulate with words, or that you can't defend with logic," says Brown.

There's clear agreement about the style of quartet playing that has influenced them most, that of the Hagen Quartet from Salzburg. But it's also a matter of horses for courses. The Borodin Quartet are a reference point for Shostakovich, the Quatuor Mosaïques and the Apponyi Quartet for Haydn. These last two are period-instruments groups, and the use of light vibrato and the pursuit of clear sound "so that you can really hear what's going on in a piece" are important aspects of the Casals's musical aesthetic.

There's also clear agreement about the kind of playing they've been reacting against, but they refuse to name names. A rich coating of consistently heavy vibrato, they say, is something that turns them off, as is the old-fashioned style of playing which is leader-dominated to the point of presenting the three lower instrumental parts as if they're somehow secondary to the first violin.

Old-style leader domination is something that's impossible for them anyway. The two violinists, Vera Martínez Mehner and Abel Tomàs Realp, rotate between first and second violin parts. "If it's more in the Classical era, Abel leads, if it's more in the Romantic era, I do. It's so normal that we don't speak about it," says Mehner. But it's not a hard and fast rule. "It depends on the characteristic of the piece," explains Abel, "in relation to our characteristics of players." Brown sees the switching as an advantage. "When they switch it does change the sound of the quartet. It helps a Mozart quartet sound that much more different from a Shostakovich quartet." But then he muses that in their recordings of Mozart early string quartets, where they switched from time to time, he would no longer be absolutely sure which violinist is playing which part. It's like everything else about this fascinating group, clear and logical on the one hand, but subtly mysterious on the other, anything but black and white.

◆ *The Cuarteto Casals play at the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, which runs from Sat, Jun 30 until Sun, July 8, www.westcorkmusic.ie*

Reviews

Bath of Baghdad Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork

MARY LELAND

Homage is an infrequent experience in Irish theatre but was a distinct component of the applause for playwright Jawad al-Assadi when he was called on stage at the end of *Bath of Baghdad*. The cast of Fayeze Kazak and Nidal Sejari were included in the warmth of this response, which in itself was an expression of the excitement of the event, a European premiere of a play about Iraq, with the author in attendance and a triumph for the Cork Midsummer Festival.

Using somewhat erratic surtitles, the play, written and performed in Arabic, makes demands on the audience, for it portrays the ordinariness of a foreign world and gives a compassionate reading of priorities in a culture we are inclined to call alien and to fear. "All men are devils now" might be the sad reflection of two brothers meeting in the only refuge - and that a very vulnerable one - left to them in their city. In the baths, scouring and laving one another, they explore their lives, going back to the early years in which brotherhood was a family matter rather than a

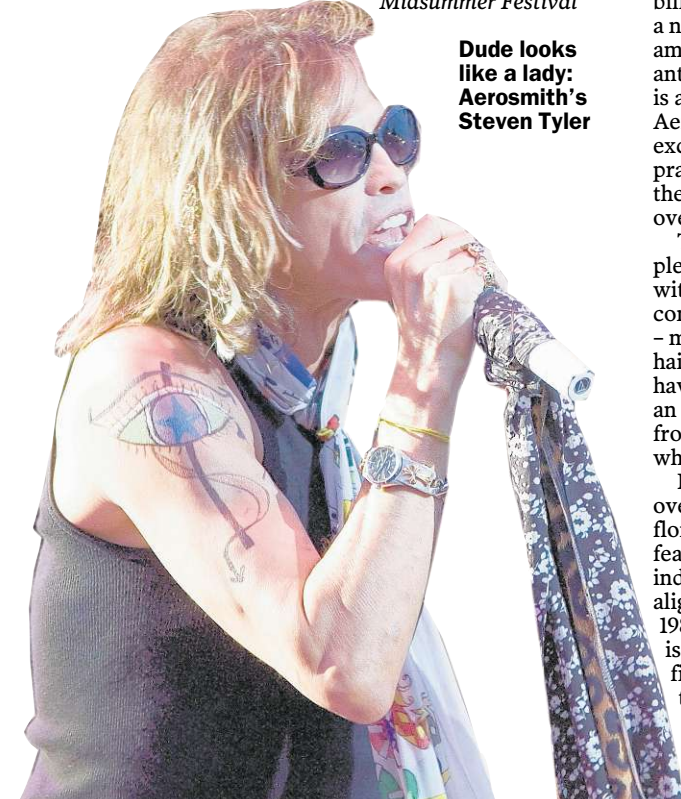
political one. They had their differences, which are remembered in the heat of this moment. Now the differences have hardened into allegiances, into questionable loyalties which, accepted rather than embraced, commit them to acts of estrangement, not only from one another but from everything they have believed important.

The disillusionment of the "little people" in any society can be both comic and dangerous and al-Assadi conveys this dichotomy with brilliance. Even in the curt phrasing of the surtitles the language is rich and colloquial; the throaty disparagements of Fayeze Kazak as Majid, the elder brother, are contrasted with the bleating tones of Nidal Sejari, which nonetheless stiffen into anger and self-contempt. Amid intermittent explosions and the shattering rattle of helicopters, as the showers go on or off as they please and the lights blaze or flicker, the brothers recognise themselves as participants in rather than victims of the destruction of the only world they know, change as it might. In the dilemmas of survival, fraternity (sisterhood is not the issue here and in fact the references to the Iraqi sisterhood are bleak indeed) is the only constant, but to this, at least, they can be true.

The direction of this piece, which runs without an interval for little more than an hour, is by al-Assadi himself, working

with the Syrian Experimental Theatre. Having found actors of this calibre and a fine composer in Raad Khalaf, he has the sense to leave well alone, although the set painted by Jaber Alwan and the lighting by Bassam Hmeidi bring a glowing visual enhancement to this thrilling production.

◆ *Runs until Sat as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival*



Dude looks like a lady: Aerosmith's Steven Tyler

Aerosmith Marlay Park, Dublin

PETER CRAWLEY

Wrapped around the microphone stand is a scarf, in leopard-skin print, which billows nicely in the breeze. Behind it is a needlessly elaborate stack of Marshall amplifiers already humming with anticipation. Projecting into Marlay Park is a long catwalk lined with strip lighting. Aerosmith, one of the most deliriously excessive rock bands to have ever pranced the earth, have not yet taken to the stage, but the spectacle is already in overdrive.

There is something endlessly pleasurable about clichés delivered without apology. For an audience containing innumerable hard-rock relics - men who, like Steven Tyler, grow their hair long, but who, unlike Steven Tyler, have no expensive stylists to tend to it - an Aerosmith concert offers a safe haven from a world grown intolerant of dudes who look like ladies.

Having drafted the blueprint for over-consumption in the 1970s with their florid, pummeling riffola and legendary feats of substance abuse, the apparently indestructible Aerosmith now seem to align themselves more firmly with their 1980s and 1990s MTV make-over. This is why Tyler, a rail-thin punk dandy, first launches into *Love in an Elevator*, that dubiously jolly rocker about sex in the workplace, and why the band are frequently accompanied by

hulking video clips from an era when Alicia Silverstone and Stephen Dorff were household names.

It's no small point that the marvellously epicene, Jagger-lipped Tyler and the lantern-jawed guitarist Joe Perry still look fantastic. Styled to within an inch of their lives, they share a microphone, throw similar wind-tunnel poses and lavish praise on one another. The other band members have sadly succumbed to the aging process and are roundly ignored, yet the songs require little touching up. *Cryin'*, *Eat the Rich*, *Livin' on the Edge*, *Sweet Emotion* and, eventually, *Walk This Way* are just as you remember them; all served with a sugary crunch, a diamond edge and ludicrously enjoyable finger and fretwork.

You might draw the line at Perry's 12-string guitar, or his double guitar, or perhaps his see-through guitar. You might want Tyler to tone down his well-rehearsed collapses, crucifixion poses or wailing harmonica solos. But that's the whole damn point of Aerosmith: to pile on the bombast without a knowing wink and to give us a hard-rock playground where we can really let our hair down.

Cooney, RTÉ NSO/Anissimov NCH, Dublin

ANDREW JOHNSTONE

French Romantic composers dominated this week's helping of easy lunch-time

listening from the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra. Chopin too was admitted, though French only on his father's side, with the Romance from his Piano Concerto No 1 in an arrangement for solo violin.

Soloist Elizabeth Cooney gave the reworked part a somewhat understated reading that tended to equate the decorative twists with the actual melodic fibre. But her dashing and fluent playing of the *Introduction and Rondo capriccioso* by Saint-Saëns communicated the gratifying sense of an easy and decisive victory over some considerable technical challenges.

Conductor Alexander Anissimov made a rather homogeneous sequence of the ballet music from Gounod's *Faust: Les Troyens* and the *Variations de Miroir* were tunelessly engaging in their way, but the *Danse antique* and *Danse de Phryne* particularly called for more impetus.

A reticent conclusion to the *Entr'acte* and *Waltz* from Delibes's *Coppélia* put the audience in some uncertainty about applauding. The final item in the programme, however, left no such doubt. One of Anissimov's greatest strengths has always been to let the fireworks go off with a bang, and it was with Dukas's vivid tone picture of a backfired magic spell that he at last invested the orchestra's polished sound with a sense of excitement.

Who knows what other works by Dukas might have numbered among today's most popular orchestral treats, had he not burned the majority of his scores? Like his titular sorcerer's apprentice, this composer surely took the house-cleaning too far.



■ **Bruce Willis** tells Donald Clarke why he likes being action man



■ **Shrek the Third:** Has the nasty ogre still got the magic?



■ **Chemical Brothers:** Dance music's great survivors still happy together

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