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Plucky Minneapolis Guitar Quartet offers refined pleasures

By Larry Fuchsberg

A mid-December concert that politely sidesteps the approaching holidays is either an act of folly or a stroke of genius. Or perhaps both. Call me Scrooge, but in a landscape glutted with Nutcrackers, Messiahs and similarly predictable seasonal effusions, The Minneapolis Guitar Quartet's program at Augsburg College on Friday seemed to be a fresh breeze.

The guitar quartet is essentially a 20th-century medium, an outgrowth of the guitar revival led by the great Andres Segovia. Unlike a string quartet, a guitar quartet can't simply feed at the trough of the musical past; most of its repertoire must be newly composed or arranged.

MGQ, as its admirers call it, has been commissioning new pieces and arranging older ones for 15 years. The ensemble – O. Nicholas Raths, David Crittenden, Joseph Hagedorn and Alan Johnston, with replaced on this occasion by the accomplished Jeff Lambert – has become one of Minnesota's more successful exports, with multiple tours, broadcasts and recordings to its credit. Friday's concert showed why.

Hagedorn's reworking of pieces by Astor Piazzolla (of new tango fame) and Spain's Isaac Albeniz were models of the arranger's art. The classical guitar operates within a narrow expressive range; dynamics, timbres and articulations are limited. At first, this may register as a loss: I missed the soulful sound of Piazzolla's concertinalike bandoneon and the washes of instrumental color so prominent in the popular orchestral versions of Albeniz's "Iberia." But once the ear adjusts to the restricted sonic palette of the guitar, Hagedorn's arrangements begin to feel like adventures in understatement, with subtle gestures taking on unexpected weight. It's like returning to Bach after an immersion in Mahler: one's hearing is sharpened, one's sensibility renewed. The danger of monotony always lurks around the next musical turn, but is dodged through the acumen of the arranger and the acuity of his colleagues.

Daniel Bernard Roumain's "Ghetto Strings" – the use of "ghetto" is not meant to be disparaging – was commissioned by MGQ with cash from St. Paul's risk-friendly Jerome Foundation, and was premiered Friday with the composer, just turned 30, on hand. Of Haitian extraction, the Harlem-based Roumain is a man worth watching, judging from this piece.

Exploring three American ghettos and Haiti, "Ghetto Strings" is simultaneously street-smart and learned. The inner movements are especially strong: "Liberty City" (a Miami neighborhood) is Latin-accented and plaintive, while "Motor City," ostensibly a portrait of Detroit, could pass for the work of a Brazilian minimalist.

MGQ is not for every taste. Listeners who need a jolt had better look elsewhere. But aficionados of transparent musical architecture and unmechanistic virtuosity should spend some time in their company.