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Miriam and I love movies, and often the Shaw's films provide opportunities to view the kind that we only find across the border at the Eastern Hills Mall. The Dipson Theatre there plays terrific foreign movies that do not circulate at the Pen Centre or Niagara Square. We recently saw "A Late Quartet," which featured some big guns: Christopher Walken, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Catherine Keener as well as two new actors for us – Mark Ivanir and Imogen Poots.

The plot is simple. A celebrated string quartet finds itself at a crossroads and in danger of disintegration after its eldest member announces his retirement due to a sudden health crisis. With terrific acting, the movie's depth relied on metaphor with memorable quotes that hit hard, particularly with seniors who reflect back on careers, retirement and loved ones.

Experiencing tremors during a rehearsal, Peter (Walken) consults a doctor, who tells him that he has Parkinson's disease. Its progression can be slowed but not arrested. He is still mourning the recent death of his wife, Miriam (mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter). The foursome meanwhile prepare for a recital of Beethoven's Opus 131 String Quartet in C-Sharp minor – supposedly the summit of all concert pieces for which Peter imparts this advice to the slightly younger musicians in his charge: "Playing so long without pause, our instruments must in time go out of tune, each in its own quite different way. It's a mess. What are we supposed to do? Stop? Or struggle to continuously adjust to each other up until the end, even if we are out of tune?"

"It's a mess." Look back on your many years like Peter does apropos not only of the quartet he has led, but life itself. Do you remember those times when your instrument was out of tune? The movie subplots involve bedroom squabbles, professional jealousies and extramarital affairs, and in the end, you feel emotionally spent yet somehow ennobled by this minute examination of life, adversity, cooperation and partnership in the making of beautiful music.

Walken as a patriarchal cellist is masterful, and it's nice for a change to watch him play a role with such gravitas rather than that of a Stephen King psycho. When he precipitously decides to retire after being diagnosed with Parkinson's, the stability of the group is challenged, with fault lines exposed below the surface.

Robert (Hoffman) is tired of playing backup to Daniel (Mark Ivanir), a perfectionist whose obsession is shattered by Robert and Juliet's (Catherine Keener) lovely daughter, Alex (Imogen Poots). When wife Juliet does not back Robert he has a one-night stand with an attractive co-jogger. Juliet confronts him, tries to steady Alex, and do what she can to save the group.

All of the actors are credible as gifted musicians. Many personal musical trainers are listed in the end credits. Walken is effective as the quartet's enduring patriarch who quotes T.S. Eliot and reflects on a Rembrandt painting as he comes to terms with his bleak future.

The film is set in Manhattan, and it somehow reminds me of Woody Allen. Despite the fact that it centres on people who play classical music, especially works in which the group must think, feel and breathe as one, it could just as easily reflect on other work teams particularly family. At the end Daniel and Robert agree to play with their music books closed, relying on passion alone.

After watching perpetual discord between Republicans and Democrats, Liberals, NDP and Conservatives, it's enlightening to watch highly competitive musical thoroughbreds put aside disagreements to work toward a common goal of flawless harmony. The rival drives for self-expression and group accord between the actors with the question of who will ultimately lead the group is a delight to experience on screen as they try to work out these difficult themes.



Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor (Op. 131), is a 40-minute string quartet whose seven movements are to be played without a pause, mimicking perhaps a life of seven decades. The film version features the Brentano String Quartet, whose music I must soon purchase!