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***Opus*, at Seattle Rep, a finely tuned production**

By Misha Berson

Who came in late on that bar? Should that phrase go into a crescendo? Are we playing this movement "allegro" or "poco allegro"?

Even if you don't know pizzicato from pianissimo, such musical shoptalk in Michael Hollinger's play "Opus" can be very compelling.

Now at Seattle Repertory Theatre in a felicitous staging by Braden Abraham, "Opus" makes the intense, semi-cloistered realm of high-stakes classical music broadly accessible.

And it gives reasons to care enormously about the fates of five musicians battling over the future of a world-famous string quartet.

Short opening monologues, meant to be snippets from a film about the fictional Lazara Quartet, set the tone: This is no casual gig. Playing in a quartet is, quips one member, like a marriage — but with more fidelity.

But fidelity is at issue here, as "Opus" explores the rigor, sensuality and personal challenges of making great music. Or making great *anything* that requires close collaboration.

A finely attuned Seattle cast performs Hollinger's clever, moving score in near-perfect pitch.

Allen Fitzpatrick (who narrowly averts caricature, in the most strident role) is the high-strung violinist Elliot, who spurred the firing of his lover, the unstable violist Dorian (charming, poignant Todd Jefferson Moore) — for obvious and covert reasons.

Caught between these two are cellist Carl (Charles Leggett), a sensible guy with his own worries, and second violinist Alan (Shawn Belyea) — a beer-and-baseball regular Joe (yes, there are many in classical music), with an eye for the ladies.

Fluid flashbacks give us the lowdown on Dorian's exit. And as the new violist, Grace, ever-nuanced Chelsey Rives captures the thrill and discomfort of trying to fit into a volatile male clan.

It's not surprising that Hollinger, a trained classical violist himself, gets the insider music details right.

And as coached by Seattle-based chamber musicians Michael Jinsoo Lim and Melia Watras, the cast has their bow-syncing to recorded music down.

Except for one shocking instance, they also hold, pack and covet their instruments convincingly. The one abstract element in Abraham's production is Etta Lilienthal's striking scenic design, which literally sets music in stone.

Hollinger keeps the witty, pithy wisecracks coming. But, a slightly confusing ending aside, his empathetic insights into group dynamics and the spiritual aspects of art make "Opus" more than a *divertissement*.

And music? Sublime passages of Bach and Beethoven are heard throughout. Thank the real-life Vertigo String Ensemble for the pleasure.