

Debussy Quartet applies deft touch to works both esoteric, popular

By Mark Kanny
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"When we play this piece, it is as though we are painting and our bows are like brushes," said violinist Christophe Collette on Sunday afternoon at the Frick Fine Arts Museum in Point Breeze. The first violinist of an ensemble called the Debussy Quartet was introducing the String Quartet by Maurice Ravel, but his ensemble's whole program served as a prelude to an upcoming exhibition, "Millet to Matisse, 19th and 20th Century French Painting," which opens on March 2.

Just as part of the delight of an art exhibition is to see famous works alongside their contemporaries, Sunday afternoon's concert mixed the esoteric with the popular. The potential of composer Guillaume Lekeu was recognized before his death in 1894, one day after his 24th birthday. He was 18 when he moved to Paris, where Eugene Ysaye commissioned his best-known piece, a violin sonata. The Debussy Quartet played a one-movement piece Lekeu wrote when he was 17, before he left his native Belgium: "Molto adagio, sempre cantata doloroso." It sustains its 12-minute length fairly well, and is impressive for a composer of his age.

The Quartet in E flat major by Edouard Lalo is a more mature work, but is lighter compositionally, in part because it was written in a different aesthetic world — more than 20 years earlier, when German weightiness had not yet affected French music. Lalo is best known for "Symphonie espagnole," a tuneful five-movement piece for solo violin and orchestra. His four-movement string quartet lasts nearly half an hour. To look for highpoints, such as the verve of its Scherzo, risks missing the allure of its consistently almost classical style. But it is also true that this music, pleasant though it may be, is not memorable.

The Debussy Quartet, formed in Lyons, France, in 1989, has made numerous recordings, including a nearly complete cycle of quartets by Dmitri Shostakovich, and gave performances on Sunday that showed why it has earned widespread respect.

It is a smoothly integrated ensemble with excellent intonation. Collette is a decisive leader with an appealing tonal palette. Anne Menier, who joined the group two years ago, is a strong second violinist who phrases with personality. Violist Vincent Deprecq is remarkable, beyond his obvious resemblance to Mario Lemieux, for the sensitivity with which he applies formidable technique. Yannick Callier is an elegant cellist.

Their performance of Maurice Ravel's String Quartet was enjoyable in many ways, not the least for knowing how to perform this music without excessive tension. The first movement was particularly endearing, but the pizzicati of the second movement ripped out boldly. Collette's comment about painting the music was most apt for the opening of Ravel's finale, where the disciplined flurry of notes did resemble the result of rapid, short brush strokes.