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Debussy String Quartet Excels

By Frank Magiera

WORCESTER— Along with fine vintage Bordeaux and triple-cream brie, here's another good reason to get over our current jingoistic revulsion for everything French : The Debussy String Quartet.

This quartet's curriculum vitae alone is enough to give any militant American patriot a grand mal de tete. Named after the famous French composer, the group comprises four talented French musicians, who are understandably proud of their reputation for introducing audiences to lesser-known French chamber music. Never mind that some critics have suggested that the quartet even sounds French, whatever that means.

The group rearranged its latest North American Tour to perform a concert Wednesday night for Music Worcester in Tuckerman Hall, an engagement postponed from Jan. 26 because of snow. The concert program, however, was more a celebration of eastern European genius than a defiant raising of the fleur-de-lis on hostile soil. The quartet explored a pastiche of mainstream chamber music by Mozart, Beethoven and Robert Schumann with nothing less than resounding aplomb. Only the encore was French - music by the quartet's namesake. But what a gem it was.

Since standing ovations are usually reserved for the end of concerts, the audience seemed almost pained to contain its appreciation for the delicate, inspired reading of Mozart's C major Quartet, which opened the concert. Their bows seeming to barely touch their strings, the musicians made it look so easy and sound so great. Even the whining chromaticisms of the unusual, dissonant introduction seemed less jarring in the hands of the Debussy Quartet.

Audiences as well as musicians of Mozart's era were troubled by those opening measures. When Haydn, to whom the quartet was dedicated, was asked if he could explain the unusual introduction, he proclaimed "If Mozart wrote it, he must have meant it."

The tenor of the concert changed dramatically when the quartet tore into Beethoven's Gross Fugue from Opus 133, which was written late in the composer's life when he was impoverished, ill and yes, famously deaf. So the anguish that pervades this music is understandable although Beethoven tempered it with sonorous passages that allow the emotion to burrow under your skin and stay there.

Initially, Beethoven wrote the piece as the final movement of his 13th Quartet, Opus 30. But audiences were less forgiving of its complications than they were of Mozart's dissonance. Eventually Beethoven replaced it with a shorter, simpler movement and consigned the Grosse Fugue to its own destiny. The Debussy Quartet plumbed its depths and heights with an impeccable melodic grace.

The showpiece of the concert's second half, Schumann's Quartet in A Major, seemed understated by comparison. No one, it seems, can write about Schumann without characterizing him as the quintessential Romantic composer. Add quintessentially manic-depressive, as well. For this piece, he emerged from a liquor-laced slump precipitated by the absence of his wife, Clara, who was off on an extended concert tour of her own. When she returned he started writing. But even the lush adagio of the third movement seemed prosaic against the passages from Beethoven and Mozart, which fairly lingered in the hall like a musical aftertaste.

It didn't help either that the musicians seemed to revel in the encore as though they were playing the Marsellaise to the Nazis in Rick's Cafe.

It was an impassioned rendering of the third movement of Debussy's String Quartet in G minor.



Artist Management

The very least you could say was Vive la France!