

Artist Management

The Debussy Quartet in Toronto

“The Debussy String Quartet put a new shine on a couple of chamber repertory chestnuts, and raised the roof with their namesake’s only string quartet.”

Debussy String Quartet @ Mooredale Concerts reviewed by Stanley Fefferman



Sunday, February 20, 2011. Walter Hall, Toronto. Photo: Bertrand Pichene

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The mournful melody that opens Puccini’s *Crisantemi* revealed a poignant sweetness as Fabrice Bihan’s cello unrolled the dark harmonic ground over which the other strings in unison streamed. The second of two melodies to survive in this sole movement of Puccini’s otherwise forgotten string quartet was developed with exceptional intonation by leader Christophe Collette, and smoothly integrated beside the richly coloured ostinato in Dorian Lamotte’s 2nd violin and Vincent Deprecq’s viola.

Alexander Borodin’s *String Quartet No. 2 in D major* is romantically lyrical to a fault. Through a fault not necessarily Borodin’s, one cannot listen to the second and third movements without intoning the lyrics of the 1953 musical *Kismet*’s two hit tunes: “Baubles, Bangles & Beads,” and “And This Is My Beloved.” These unfortunate associations notwithstanding, the Debussy players brought a redeeming elegance and tonal colour to the work as a whole. They took advantage of chromatic possibilities in the lively fourth movement to put a needed touch of lemon to the honeyed melodies.

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Page 2...

The Borodin and Puccini pieces are from the start nice work in a traditional line. Debussy’s *String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10*, though classic in form, broke new sonic ground in 1893, and as this Quartet plays it, still sounds new. There is brilliance in the rhythmically complex and melodically convoluted germinal theme, and there is audacity in running it through all four movements. By keeping this single idea in the listener’s mind, Debussy has a basis on which to focus his Protean ability of transformation—variation in rhythm, meter, tempo, texture, tone, mood, mode and instrumentation.

Listening to this performance I had the feeling of witnessing the solid shapes and colours of a landscape break down as if light reflected from solid surfaces were to behave like light reflecting off water flowing in sunlight. Images diffuse in sprays of refracted colour, fracture fractally and regroup in psychedelically patterned zigzag crenellations of a migraine aura or epileptic seizure or the mystical visions of Hildegard of Bingen. The landscapes of Seurat and Pissaro come to mind, where shapes melt down to colour and colour begins to dance as points of light.

Debussy’s musical phrases arise and fall off; lines of conversation are interrupted, change direction, dissolve into vibrations, accelerate into whirlpools of energy that subside back into lovely, lyrical phrases that haunt by being repeated and merge eventually into long melodic lines that promise a pastoral peace. Debussy’s music is quite fearless, and cheerful in a Gallic way, and this Quartet that bears his name carries it well.

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