

The Oregonian

EBENE QUARTET CONQUERS PORTLAND

By David Stabler, The Oregonian March 17, 2009

The Ebene Quartet is making its American debut this month, with concerts in Boston, Seattle, Portland, Neskowin (!), Washington, D.C. and New York. If the young Parisians play as they did Monday in Portland, they will be back. Many times.

Allan Kozinn in the New York Times liked what he heard last week in a concert that mixed Haydn and Debussy with jazz and even a bit of singing - "Someday My Prince Will Come." Words he used to describe their playing included "nuanced," "supple," "hot-blooded" and "consistently inventive."

On Monday, the Frenchmen played it straighter with a program of Haydn, Faure and Schubert on a Friends of Chamber Music concert at First United

"...exquisite intimacy."

Methodist Church in Portland. However, for their encore, they gave a hint of their jazz personalities, scrubbing away at "Misirlou" from the film "Pulp Fiction." Like the Kronos Quartet, they seemed at home in both styles.

What struck me about their playing of Haydn (Op. 71, No. 2) and Schubert ("Death and the Maiden") was their agility of sound. Where some quartets apply a one-size-fits-all fortissimo that can weary the ear, these guys employed an unusually wide variety of tone, vibrato, intensity and other expressive devices, making the music sound newly considered. Technically, they are of the highest order.

"...moving seamlessly from Schubert's motionless gloom to rhapsodic fervor..."

First violinist Pierre Colombet often exploited the quieter dynamic

range of his instrument, playing many leading passages with a hollow, almost hooty, tone. This had the effect of commanding attention, but also, sometimes getting lost in the mix. But not in the transcendent variations in "Death and the Maiden," which he played with such exquisite intimacy, you almost had to lean forward to hear him. The soft, high tracery of the fourth variation, over murmuring lower strings, altered my perceptions, if briefly, of the violin's voice.

Colombet had power, too, but it wasn't the glassy, power-playing sound of some first violinists. Cellist Raphael Merlin also had a wide tonal palette, moving seamlessly from Schubert's motionless gloom to rhapsodic fervor, as the music dictated. Second violinist Gabriel Le Magadure and violist Mathieu Herzog were equally imaginative in the ensemble's inner voices.

I must say a little Faure goes a long way with me. My wife and I argue over this - she adores his piano music while I don't get the payoff from its rootless busyness. I love the Faure Piano Quartet and the Violin Sonata, but his sole String Quartet, not so much. If I want ambiguity, I'll take Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht."

It's a cliché to say that the players gave this French music a polished performance, but they did just that, with a high-gloss sound.

It won't be too soon until they return to Portland.

The Ebene performs an all-Beethoven program tonight (March 17) at Reed College's Kaul Auditorium. Go.