

Concert review

New cellist a good fit for quartet

The addition of Steven Doane to the Los Angeles Piano Quartet doesn't upset the ensemble's perfect balance.

By Susan L. Peña

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The Los Angeles Piano Quartet performed for the second time this year in Reading, this time with a new cellist, as part of the Friends of Chamber Music of Reading series, Saturday night in the Woman's Club Center for the Arts.

This quartet has been known for its tight ensemble playing, so replacing a member might have upset the balance. But while Peter Rejto was a fine player, his replacement, Steven Doane, is a great find. And best of all, he fits right in; the ensemble was every bit as perfect as before.

All four players have strong personalities. Michi Wiancko's violin is clear, clean and strong, her playing full of finesse; Katherine Murdock's viola is warm and sweet; and pianist Xak Bjerken has a touch that can be light and elegant or full and lush — he's a fine interpreter and accompanist.

Doane, who was featured in Debussy's 1915 Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor to open the concert, is vigorous and energetic, a passionate performer with a rich tone. The first movement was essentially a soliloquy for the cello, with the piano providing a moonlit background, and Doane's playing was eloquent and riveting.

The second movement, opening with gulping pizzicatos and characterized by quick-changing moods, was a showcase for Doane's formidable technique and impish humor.

All the pieces on the program were written by composers who were roughly contemporaries although the pieces were composed years apart. But they shared a belle époque sensibility; the program was full of the most beautiful melodies and harmonies.

Dvorak's Piano Quartet in D Major, Op. 23, composed in the 1870s, is typical of that composer in its use of Czech-inspired themes and catchy dance rhythms in the third movement. The players performed it with great energy and, particularly in the case of the first movement, with perfect balance; each instrument was given equal weight.

Faure's Quartet in G minor, Op. 45, written about 10 years later, boasted a surging, brilliant opening and much full-bodied, satisfying music throughout. The viola was featured often, especially in the third Adagio movement, and Murdock's playing was gorgeous.

After the ominous, nervous second movement, that calm barcarole brought an almost unbearable pleasure. And the feverish waltz that ended the evening was played with a swept-away feeling, as if the players could barely contain their joy.