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Sounds of Silence at the Freer

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John Cage would have loved it. The members of the Leipzig String Quartet were scattered half a football field apart in the grand hall of the Freer Gallery on Wednesday, attending to their roles in his "Music for Four." Meanwhile, the audience wandered about, checking out the Whistler paintings in adjoining galleries, looking over the musicians' shoulders or just trying to keep their shoes from squeaking.

This is how Cage wanted his music to be experienced, as a part of a more comprehensive set of stimulations. That the acoustics in that huge space were clean and allowed some sense of musical intimacy was just a fortunate accident; in that environment, Cage's ruminations were hauntingly beautiful.

The audience was seated more conventionally for the first half of the program (works by Hosokawa, Takemitsu and Tan Dun), but the music itself was anything but conventional. All three composers use silence as powerfully as they use sound. Rooted in contemplative Eastern philosophies, their music is not structured to progress, so rhythm is not a primary element. Instead, timelessness is the objective and their works give a new meaning to the idea of "living in the moment."

Hosokawa's "Silent Flowers" in which long, drawn-out sounds are narrowed and then broadened, was a vivid depiction of calligraphy. Takemitsu's "In a Landscape" took complicated sound structures and distilled them into a single tone. And in his "Eight Colors for String Quartet," Tan Dun explored a subtle palette of wonderful, and sometimes surprising, sounds.

The musicians of the quartet handled all this with artistry, calmness, conviction and a dollop of humor.

-- Joan Reinthaler