

The Hartford Courant

Hartford, Connecticut

November 16, 2006

review

Parisii String Quartet in command of the music

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SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

On Tuesday night, the University of Connecticut's Von der Mehden Recital Hall concert was the setting for an evening of

French chamber music and song, as presented by the Parisii String Quartet.

Featuring works

by Debussy, Ravel, Franck, and Fauré, the program was a bit unusual as string quartet concerts go: Evenly divided between instrumental and vocal works, it even included a piece from which the quartet was entirely absent.

Preceding the concert was a talk by Bruce Bellingham, professor emeritus of music at the university, who explained connections between Franck's Symphony in D minor and the Debussy quartet, while pointing out the Spanish influence in Debussy's and Ravel's pieces. Unfazed by a few technical problems, and willing to play a bit of "air violin" to boot, he was an engaging presence.

The concert opened with a

terrific performance of Debussy's famous G minor quartet. A string quartet comprised of French musicians ought to have this piece in its bones, and the Parisii did not disappoint. They were in command of this music: Every detail of every passage felt carefully heard and exquisitely sculpted. Particularly impressive were the lyricism of violist Dominique Lobet and the passionate intensity of cellist Jean-Philippe Martignoni.

Joining the quartet for the evening were pianist Philippe Bianconi and baritone Jérôme Corréas, who had the stage to themselves for Maurice Ravel's "Don Quichotte à Dulcinée". In the final years of his life, a neurological disorder robbed Ravel of the ability to compose, and the three songs of this set were his last completed works. They speak of courtly love, religious mystery, and in the closing "Drinking Song," the joys of wine.

Corréas is a skilled interpreter, well-suited to this music, with a smooth, clear and expressive baritone voice. He was particularly radiant in the second song, "Chanson épique." One wishes that the piece's meditative

ending hadn't been marred by the sound of audience members prematurely turning their programs to the next page.

The first half concluded with César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor. Written in 1878-1879, Franck's quintet is thought to have been inspired by his student Augusta Holmes, a beautiful young woman with whom the composer was deeply in love.

It's tempting indeed to see a program of sorts in the tonal architecture of the piece, built largely from the tension between two closely related keys (F minor and D-flat major) and a third, distant relative (A minor): a "harmonic triangle," so to speak, that could serve as a metaphor for a real-life love triangle. The Parisii and pianist Bianconi were in terrific form, offering up a powerful and nuanced interpretation that captured the dramatic arc of the piece as a whole while remaining sensitive to all of its carefully-crafted details.

The concert finished with a song cycle by Gabriel Fauré, "La Bonne Chanson," a setting of poems written by Paul Verlaine for his wife-to-be. Composed for baritone

and piano quintet, this chromatic music demands a singer who can navigate its ever-changing harmonies without ever losing his way.

Tremendous credit is due here to Corréas, who exhibited

impeccable intonation and declamation. Of the nine songs, perhaps the most striking was "La lune blanche" (The white moon), in whose piano writing one could hear an unexpected echo of Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata.

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