

**Music review: ‘Brilliant’ Ariel
Quartet opens 36th season of
Music in Deerfield at Smith College in Northampton**

The 36th season of Music in Deerfield began with a concert by the Ariel Quartet at Sweeney Hall of Smith College in Northampton last Saturday, attended by a large and appreciative audience.

The group, which was formed in Israel in 1998, is the quartet in residence at the Conservatory of the University of Cincinnati, and its members are no more than 30 years old — youthful for a string quartet and exceptional for one that already has earned an international reputation. At a time when there are many excellent professional quartets, this one is outstanding for its perfect ensemble, vigor and range of musical interpretation. The playing of a challenging program on this occasion was brilliant and it was heard in a rapt silence by the audience.

The program began with the first of the six quartets in Joseph Haydn’s Opus 96, written in 1796 after Haydn’s return from his second visit to London, and the only one of the three works in the program likely to be played by amateur groups. Nevertheless, as in all of Haydn’s chamber music, there is no room for error and it demands absolute accuracy and clarity. The Ariel Quartet performed this beautiful work with complete lucidity, while the musicians played the slow movement with profound feeling: indeed this was the most moving part of the program.

There followed Robert Schumann’s quartet in F, Opus 41, No. 2. It was composed in 1842, two years after Schumann’s marriage to Clara Wieck, which led to a period of intense creativity. This is the shortest of the three quartets in Opus 41 — less than 25 minutes, little more than half the length of Schubert’s quartet in G. It begins with a lovely theme, and the listener knows immediately how far Schumann has come from the uncompromising clarity of Haydn’s work. The second movement is a set of variations, rather less romantic than the first movement. Throughout the work the players adapted their playing perfectly to the very different style from that demanded by Haydn. Schumann’s work is always pleasant to hear, but never as challenging as the Haydn and Schubert quartets.

The final work on the program was Franz Schubert’s quartet in G, the 15th and last of his quartets, written in a period of 10 days in June 1826, two-and-a-half years before his death. The illness that killed him had begun in 1822 and it is possible that it contributed in some measure to the underlying pathos in even the most beautiful of Schubert’s melodies...

This program made exceptional demands on its players, all answered with skill and grace. There could not have been a better start to the new season for Music in Deerfield, whose next concert will be on Nov. 9, a violin recital by Rachel Barton-Pine.