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The American String Quartet's annual appearance on the Harris Hall stage spanned a range of styles, from the elegant if melancholy Mozart to the overstuffed sofa that is Dohnányi's Piano Quintet. The highlight for me, however, was a razor-sharp, intense account of Bartók's String Quartet No. 2.

The Bartók requires tremendous concentration from both players and listeners, rewarded with tangled and remarkably colorful passages that morph seamlessly with the next in endless forward propulsion. The contact between the quartet and audience was palpable; they played against a bed of utter silence. After the searching first movement and nervous but vital second, the finale seemed to float through space as it nudged this way and that, finishing with a sense of resignation. Throughout, the playing was taut and unfailingly focused.

The Mozart wove its own intricate magic, especially in the exquisitely framed slow movement and the menuetto that stopped just this side of stomping. The Dohnányi stormed from the starting gate, voicing rich harmonies more dense than Brahms might have written, pushing rhythms relentlessly. The balance with pianist Anton Nel was flawless, which allowed the individual lines to emerge clearly, at least from time to time.