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Dover Quartet's Kennedy Center debut shows why they should be on must-hear list

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Conservatories are churning out young new string quartets at a dizzying rate, but lovers of chamber music should put the Dover Quartet on their to-hear list. The group, formed at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music in 2008, swept the Banff International String Quartet Competition last year. Its local debut, last October as part of the Candlelight Concert Series in Columbia, Md., was a triumph, and its Kennedy Center debut, at Wednesday night's Fortas Chamber Music Concerts season opener in the Terrace Theater, was in the same category.

In addition to the first prize at Banff, the group won awards for best performances of quartets by Haydn and Schubert, composers shaping up to be their specialty. In Mozart's "Hoffmeister" quartet (D major, K. 499) the sound was lambent and evenly balanced, with the musicians delighting in uncovering this near-perfect score's musical details and, tellingly, enjoying hearing one another play it. The menuetto, which can be a throwaway movement in some performances, was quick-pulsed and fun, and the slow movement delectably phrased.

As for Schubert, the "Rosamunde" quartet (A minor, D. 804) also had just the right tempos, the first movement's quotation of the song "Gretchen am Spinnrade" steeped in bleak melancholy from the slow-starting spin of the spinning wheel. The guileless quality of the andante, freely weaving through its harmonic twists, held a somewhat noisy audience in rapt silence, followed by a gentle menuetto and thrilling finale. Only the opening work, Alexander Glazunov's "Five Novelettes," Op. 15, did not hold up to the same standard, bringing out unexpected strident qualities in the violins, although both cellist Camden Shaw and violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt purred and soared in these charming vignettes, as elsewhere.