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NU's new Galvin Hall, Dover Quartet work splendidly in concert



Joel Link, from left, Bryan Lee, Camden Shaw and Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt of the Dover Quartet perform at the opening of the Galvin Recital Hall in Evanston on Wednesday.

By John von Rhein
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A new concert facility and a new resident string quartet have made Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music a prime center of attention this fall.

Both the Mary B. Galvin Recital Hall and the Dover Quartet surpassed expectations Wednesday night when the impressive young American ensemble gave the inviting new auditorium its concert baptism. The program marked the beginning of the quartet's three-year residency at the Bienen School, a residency that is to include a concert each academic term, coaching sessions with student ensembles, master classes and open rehearsals. It augured well.

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The sound as heard from front and rear locations struck me as clear and well-balanced, rather on the dry side but not unpleasantly so. It felt most appropriate for the works on the concert's first half where textural lucidity is crucial — Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet (No. 17 in B flat) and Henri Dutilleux's "Ainsi la nuit."

I would have preferred hearing Schumann's Quartet No. 1 in A minor (Opus 41, No. 1) in a somewhat warmer acoustical setting, although the clarity of counterpoint and fine degrees of timbre and dynamics exposed by the room's ambience were much to be appreciated in the Dover's fine performance.

Winner of the grand prize and all three special prizes at the 2013 Banff International String Quartet Competition, and a standout at the 2014 and 2015 Bienen School Winter Chamber Music festivals, the Dover Quartet players have it in them to become the next Guarneri String Quartet — they're that good. Expert musicianship, razor-sharp ensemble, deep musical feeling and a palpable commitment to communication made their performances satisfying on many levels.

Their Mozart thrived in the bright, hard clarity of the Galvin Hall sonics. Quick conversational pages took on added urgency by virtue of the whistle-clean ensemble playing of Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violins; Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, viola; and Camden Shaw, cello. Yet their hearty vigor was not achieved at the expense of precise intonation or smoothly shaped linear flow.

The seven linked sections of Dutilleux's "Ainsi la nuit" ("Thus the Night") were played with exacting control of tonal quality, balance and tuning but also a collective sensitivity to conveying the kaleidoscopic variety of color and atmosphere behind each minute musical gesture.

The Dover Quartet brought an assertive urgency to the Schumann that played up the music's extrovert vitality rather more than its inner warmth and lyricism: One had the sense that getting to the destination was more important to the players than lingering over passing pleasures. An exhilarating reading was the result nonetheless, notably in the Mendelssohn-like Scherzo and rapid-fire exchanges of the finale.