

The Boston Globe

Parker Quartet opens Harvard residency with style

By Matthew Guerrieri

October 2, 2014

Cambridge – The importance of a good first impression is a universally-instilled source of anxiety. Interestingly, for their first concert as Blodgett Artists-in-Residence at Harvard University, at Paine Hall on Friday, the Parker Quartet programmed music in which such impressions deceive. It was more of a reintroduction, anyway, the residency bringing violinists Daniel Chong and Ying Xue, violist Jessica Bodner, and cellist Kee-Hyun Kim – New England Conservatory graduates all – back to the area after several years in Minnesota. Appropriately, the program ended with a homecoming.

But first came Franz Joseph Haydn's D major Quartet (Op. 76, No.5), opening with elegant classicism that nonetheless becomes more and more overwhelmed with energetic embellishment. The performance, too, perked up as the intricacy multiplied. (A similar spirit prevailed in the group's encore, the Adagio from Haydn's Op. 20, No. 5 Quartet.) The slow movement springs another surprise, an expanse of Baroque-tinged melancholy that nearly effaces the rest of the score. Haydn glossed that bait-and-switch with a finale that literally starts off with its own ending – the first impression being the last, and vice versa.

The playing was courtly but cagey, the sound either focused to a point or delicately velvety. But having introduced themselves as pleasant and well-spoken, the players then revealed themselves as far more intriguing guests. In the quicksilver nocturnes of Henri Dutilleux's "Ainsi la Nuit" ("Thus the Night"), that palette bloomed. Full harmonies ranged from polished-metal lean to plushly warm; pizzicati evoked the stars' pinpoint twinkle and the ominous snap of a branch. Dutilleux's masterpiece, one of the great quartets of the past half-century, is a complex play of memory and reflections, a dark night in a hall of mirrors. The performance was superb, alive to every shift and nuance of color.

Though Antonin Dvorák's A-flat major Quartet (Op. 105) was conceived in New York, where the composer yearned for his Bohemian home, it was only completed after he returned. The brooding opening thus re-creates former nostalgia: a memory of a memory. But the piece reaches a happy end by way of some generously lavish Romanticism, in which the Parker happily immersed itself. Throughout, the ensemble's interpretations focused on a vibrant, perpetually-renewed present, fully invested in every passing dramatic idea; in that sense, Dvorák offered plenty of opportunities to be seized. The players made the most of the chance to make a countless number of confident, arresting first impressions, one after another.