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Parker Quartet uses Stradivari treasures to splendid effect at Library of Congress

By Stephen Brookes

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The Library of Congress is more than a little proud of its historical musical instruments, particularly the violins, violas and cellos made by Antonio Stradivari at the turn of the 18th century. It's a rare treat to hear them played, and rarer still to hear five of them together — which may account for the crowds that jammed Coolidge Auditorium on Wednesday night for the “Antonio Stradivari Anniversary Concert,” when the Parker Quartet (with guest violist Kikuei Ikeda) presented a program that highlighted the instruments' distinctively warm and engaging sound.

But it was the playing, rather than the celebrity instruments, that really impressed. The Parker opened with Mendelssohn's String Quartet No. 3 in D, and while it may not be the composer's most interesting work — it's pleasant, well-mannered and agreeable to a fault — the ensemble's exceptional virtuosity was clear right out of the gate, with violinists Daniel Chong and Ying Xue leading a playful, fast-paced and imaginative interpretation.

The tone quickly shifted with Dmitri Shostakovich's troubling and enigmatic String Quartet No. 9, and the contrast with Mendelssohn could not have been more stark. Biting, complex and intensely personal, this is music steeped in dread — the whole waking nightmare that Shostakovich endured — and the Parker brought it off with quiet, probing intelligence. Subdued rather than edgy, it may have been a bit too soft around the edges to satisfy hard-core Shostakovich-ians; it depends on how straight you take your angst.

Angst was nowhere to be found in the closing work, the rapturous String Quintet in E-flat, Op. 97, by Antonin Dvorak, which he wrote on holiday in Iowa in the summer of 1893. Dvorak said he was out to write “something really melodious and simple,” and he inarguably succeeded. The work (for which the Parker players were joined by Ikeda, of the illustrious Tokyo Quartet) floats by like a sunny summer day, smiling and open-hearted, surging with uplifting melodies and an unshakable conviction that all is well with the world. The players gave it a warm, affectionate and suitably untroubled reading.