



Review: American String Quartet at Zankel **The premier quartet delivers a program of anguish and beauty**

By Brendan James, March 24, 2012

For a single concert program to successfully combine the lofty work of Haydn, the tortured scribbles of Bartók, and the sublime strokes of Ravel, serious talent is required of the performers.

On Saturday evening the American String Quartet, an internationally renowned group hailing originally from Juilliard, handled the task with tender care. The result was a varied and thrilling performance that captured the brilliance of each distinct piece.

Shooting occasional glances at one another, the members of the quartet demonstrated their mastery of the music as well as their confidence in interpretation.

Beginning with Haydn's Quartet in G Major, Op. 77, No. 1, the players were sharp in execution without giving away any of the composition's playful folksiness, derived from traditional Hungarian and Croatian dances. Cellist Wolfram Koessel provided a rounded bounce underneath first violinist Peter Winograd, who glided through Haydn's intricate but smooth melodies.

In no small part due to Haydn's flowing style, the performers seemed as though their fingers were only grazing the strings of their instruments, producing effortless and perfectly congruent harmony.

Once the first piece was over, however, sweet harmony was no longer the rule. Bartók's Quartet No. 6 was written under the looming shadow of Nazi Germany's march on Europe; during the threatening trudge of the second movement one could hear the performers evoking the swing of the 1930s in the grace notes before each stomp.

In their early years the American Quartet studied with one of the original performers of this work, Eugene Lehner of the Kolisch Quartet. It is little wonder then, that Winograd and second violin Laurie Carney came together at the perfect level of Bartók's intentionally less than perfect pitch.

Again, the powerful resonance of Koessel on cello fully captured each pop and pluck of Bartók's anxiety-ridden masterpiece. But it was Daniel Avshalomov on viola who provided the highlight of this section as he slapped and strummed his way through the third movement's broken cabaret dance.

By the finale of the piece the performers were more than instrumentalists: the power of the music had their bodies twisting just as much as Bartók's writhing harmonies.

The program drew to a close with Ravel's impeccable Quartet in F Major. The group lifted the audience from the underground bunkers of the previous piece and gently set off on a rolling tide of Ravel's scalar melodies. The iconic second movement in particular, *Azses vif: Très rythmé*, resonated throughout Zankel as a distillation of the warm, high-spirited spring evening.

It was difficult not to burst out into applause following the group's wonderful delivery of the second movement's romp; the audience had to wait for the last notes of Ravel's finale, after which the Quartet earned three standing ovations.

Few performances this year have captured the essence of the season the way that the American String Quartet conjured up the lively and mischievous elements of spring in the final moments of that breezy night in Zankel.