

Juilliard String Quartet plays briefly but with flair

Friends of Music series celebrates 20 years with a renowned group

Happy birthday to the Friends of Music series at Queens University of Charlotte. It just celebrated 20 years of bringing chamber music to the people who love it.

It marked the occasion in a weird way, though: by bringing in a renowned ensemble for what amounted to merely half a concert. The Juilliard String Quartet played for about 45 minutes -- with much of its trademark flair, to be sure, but for only 45 minutes -- and that was that.

Well, that wasn't *quite* that. The rest of Saturday night was devoted to a pre-concert reception and post-concert dinner for people who shelled out \$175 apiece. Presumably their dollars entitled them to silverware, unlike the patrons of an even pricier recent fund-raising shindig. But the musical meal was on the light side.

The two pieces on the program -- an amiable Mozart quartet and a rich Antonin Dvorak one -- held many appeals, especially when it came to glowing lyricism. The Juilliard players found as much heart in the Classical flow of Mozart's melodies as in the Romantic expansiveness of Dvorak's. That whetted the appetite for a whole concert's worth of music.

In any case, the players -- violinists Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes, violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick -- turned in the kind of spontaneous, richly crafted performance that has long been the group's hallmark.

Maybe the four were a little too genteel at times in Mozart's "Prussian" Quartet, K. 575. They treated the first movement practically as a conversation among themselves. It was refined and soft-spoken almost to a fault. But they lifted their voices just enough for the "Andante" to sing out gently and expressively. Simply by lingering slightly over a melody's most telling turn, they made its tenderness hit home.

They dispelled the mood lightly through the airiness and lift they gave the minuet. Then they glided into the finale, putting elegance back in the forefront. They injected a little spirit, though, by the way each of them swept into its liveliest theme -- a downward-rushing scale that jumps from player to player.

That spunkiness also turned up in Dvorak's Quartet in C major, Op. 61. When the music needed to dance, the group laid into it with gusto. But lyricism and introspection were more what the piece was about. The group's expansiveness, subtle interplay and wealth of soft colors made the ruminations come alive. And its warmth made the slow movement as luxurious as it was cozy.

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