

ROSSETTI

STRING QUARTET

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Quartet puts Debussy in context

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PALM BEACH — Promise me the Debussy *String Quartet*, and I'll follow you anywhere. This qualifies as desert-island music in my book, upper-level stuff I can't do without for long.

Several seasons ago, four musicians - named in fact, the Debussy Quatour (or Quartet) - distilled from the work the essence of all things French. Here was the ultimate, I thought: a live performance of immeasurable refinement, polished to an impossibly high standard.

But Tuesday night on the Flagler Museum Music Series, lightning struck again. This time, though, the electricity didn't travel in a straight line. **Even better, the Rossetti String Quartet defined Debussy not just by his unmistakable style, but also in light of how much he had in common with his contemporaries.** As if mapping a strand of DNA, the Rossetti made it so clear that Debussy swam in the same musical gene pool as other greats producing masterworks in 1893: Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler and yes, even as far-fetched as it seems, Giacomo Puccini.

How easy it is to forget that composers don't live in a vacuum. Even if they don't travel in the same circles, they relate to events of the era, the latest developments in the arts, the tastes of their audiences.

And Debussy, an ace music critic and astute observer of the musical scene, followed international trends avidly. His writings, still in print, confirm his wealth of experience, the concepts he related to, the ones he rejected. Yet today we tend to hear him only through the narrow prism called Impressionism - a label he decidedly disliked.

To hear his only quartet played by the Rossetti was to understand more of what Debussy was hearing at the time. The rare opportunity to tell those elements apart, to break down the molecules that traveled the European air currents in 1893, is in direct proportion to how well the Rossetti musicians understood them.

If feeling surrounded by a work's beauty is enriching; feeling plugged into a much larger perspective because of it is priceless.

And no, no sacred rules or hallowed traditions died as a result of Tuesday night's performance. The four men, ages 39 to 46, simply invested a compelling level of depth and insight into their playing.

Violinists Timothy Fain and Henry Gronnier, violist/music commentator Thomas Diener and cellist Eric Gaenslen play as a remarkably intuitive ensemble. It shows in the focused, natural tone and precise balance that not even the museum's grand, reverberant West Room can smear. Yet bold, spontaneous solos broke out in the final movements of the Debussy as well as its companion pillar, the Dvorak *String Quartet in A-Flat*, Op. 105 (1895).

To borrow a film term, the players' continuity wasn't always the best. Some effects, more spliced in than smoothed out, left both finales a bit lumpy. But the encore, Dvorak's charming *Waltz*, Op. 54, No. 1 breathed and sighed, closing a big program with quiet tenderness.

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