

Distinguished by an Impressively Refined Sound

Concert program books often include innumerable dry details about the performers: daunting lists of conservatories, accolades, prizes and orchestral and recital

MUSIC REVIEW

VIVIEN
SCHWEITZER

When the Stradivari Quartett, based in Zurich, made its United States debut on Thursday night at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it instead provided résumés for the instruments — all made by the ensemble's famous namesake.

The King George violin, played

Stradivari Quartett

Metropolitan Museum of Art

by the second violinist, Elisabeth Harringer, has a particularly colorful history. Made in 1710, it was named after King George III, who gave it to a Scottish officer whose motto was reportedly “not without my Stradivari.” He was killed in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, but his hardy instrument survived in his horse's saddlebag.

As you might expect (or at

least hope) from an ensemble emphasizing its blue-blood instrumental pedigree, this quartet was distinguished by an impressively refined sound. Its all-Beethoven concert at the museum's Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium was the second in a series featuring the complete Beethoven string quartets by six international ensembles.

This group performed string quartets from Beethoven's early, middle and late periods in chronological order, opening with the A major (Op. 18, No. 5). The Opus 18 quartets reflect the influence of Beethoven's predecessors, particularly No. 5, which he modeled on Mozart's K. 464. But Beethoven also broke with tradition by placing the most substantial movements at the end of the work.

The Stradivari highlighted the work's classicism with sweet-toned elegance and subtle, dynamic shadings, like a shimmering pianissimo in the Andante. The first violinist, Bartek Niziol (who plays the 1715 Aurea), performed throughout the evening with remarkably nuanced phrasing. He was well matched by his excellent colleagues: Ms. Harringer; the violist David Greenlees (who plays the 1734 Gibson); and the cellist Maja Weber (who uses a 1717 Bonamy Dobree-Suggia).

Their performance of the Quartet in F major (Op. 59, No. 1), “Razumovsky,” in which Beethoven breaks new ground in the genre with contrapuntal complexity and increased dramatic scope, was equally polished but suitably more vigorous. The Russian theme in the final movement is a nod to the count who commissioned the set of three quartets.

The program concluded with a committed, intense performance of the magisterial Quartet in C sharp minor (Op. 131), framed by Mr. Niziol's singing tone and expressive control.

The next concert in the Beethoven series features the Talich Quartet on Feb. 5 at the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium, Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 570-3949, metmuseum.org.