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Hermès Quartet

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Hermès Quartet shows polish, potential at Kennedy Center performance

Robert Battey | *The Washington Post* | October 9, 2013



Hermès Quartet (Photo: Francois Sechet)

The Young Concert Artists of Washington has been presenting rising talent at the Kennedy Center for 35 years now, and Tuesday it hit a home run with a spectacular debut by the Hermès Quartet. This remarkably mature group was formed only five years ago, while studying in France and Germany. On Tuesday, at the Terrace Theater, its members demonstrated world-class quartet playing.

All four musicians combine personality and beauty of sound with pinpoint collective accuracy. From the opening phrase of the Debussy Quartet in G Minor, it was clear that every single articulation and expression mark on the page was going to get its due, but projected with flair and imagination rather than dutiful literalness. Climaxes and surprises were expertly prepared, but everything had a natural, surging flow. The Andantino was undercharacterized, the articulation a little wan, but otherwise the Hermès mastered every technical challenge, allowing the music to bloom and dance.

Henri Dutilleux's "Ainsi la Nuit," from the 1970s, is by now a true classic, one of the very few atonal pieces people listen to with actual enjoyment. It has been something of a calling card for the Hermès, which has won several competitions with it, and Tuesday's performance was filled with color and fantasy.

The group gave only a glimpse of its abilities in earlier repertoire, Schubert's brief "Quartettsatz" and a Haydn encore. The former was lithe and clean, although the leader tended to skate over rather than dig into his virtuoso runs. The Haydn slow movement, in F-sharp major, further confirmed the quartet's miraculous control of intonation. It does remain to be seen how well the musicians understand and unlock the universe behind the "simple" notes of the classical masters, but they certainly have every tool. (Although, like another young quartet I heard last week, the violist's instrument did not seem equal in quality to those of the others.)

The concert closed with the rarely heard and extremely difficult Verdi Quartet in E Minor. Here again, the virtuosity dazzled, particularly in the prestissimo, the whiplash passage-work framing a droll, perfectly phrased cello solo.

If these young artists persevere and develop together, they will likely take their place among the top quartets of our time.