

# A Fascinating Evening of Quartets

Lafayette String Quartet

Ann Elliott-Goldschmid, violin

Sharon Stanis, violin

Joanna Hood, viola

Pamela Highbaugh Aloni, cello

Phillip T Young Recital Hall

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By Deryk Barker

"Better not to listen to [Debussy's music]; you risk getting used to it and then you would end by liking it."

The words are those of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's to his pupil Igor Stravinsky. It is easy to forget, from this late vantage point, just how iconoclastic a composer Debussy was to his contemporaries.

Debussy's sole essay for string quartet formed the finale of Friday's superb programme from the Lafayette Quartet.

Once more the Lafayettes confirmed their stature as a world-class quartet. Their ensemble, as one might expect from a group well into their third decade together, is immaculate no matter how wide the rubato becomes; their tone production ranges from the rich and resonant to the exquisitely delicate. But, most important, no matter how well one knows the work being performed and no matter how ingrained are one's own notion of the the work should go, when the Lafayettes are playing, their every gesture seems so inevitably right, even when it surprises, that one is never tempted to question their interpretation.

And so it was with the Debussy, from the impassioned opening movement, via the delicious pizzicatos of the second movement (suggesting, to this listener at any rate, the dappling of sunlight through leaves), the languour of the slow movement with its exquisite final chords to the ardent finale. This was not so much a performance to criticise as a performance to sink oneself into and enjoy.

The first half of the evening consisted of two very different 20th century American works: one totally unfamiliar to most of the audience, one which includes one of Classical Music's Greatest Hits.

Samuel Barber's String Quartet No.1 opens dramatically and closes defiantly. But, between these two quicker movements, comes the slow movement, far better-known as the Adagio for Strings - an arrangement made at the suggestion of Arturo Toscanini (showing that he did occasionally have good taste in contemporary music).

Emotionally the adagio is the centre of the work and Friday's performance was superb, with the tension leading up to the central climax becoming almost unbearable. And it is particularly gratifying to hear this music not only in its original version, for four solo strings, but also in its original context.

For most of the audience, the least familiar music must have been the quartet of Ruth Crawford (Seeger), an unashamedly avant-garde work of great contrasts, organised with great technical skill and facility.