

Review**Cleveland Chamber Music Society:
Quatuor ébène at Plymouth Church (April 16)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Anybody who thinks that string quartet concerts can be uneventful — or downright *ennui*-producing — should have heard the French bad boys who make up Quatuor ébène on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series at Plymouth Church on April 16. Pierre Colombet, Gabriel Le Magadure, Mathieu Herzog and Raphaël Merlin took mostly well-mannered quartets by Mozart and Mendelssohn out and gave them a hard ride. Either you hated their interpretations for their sheer wilfulness and distortion or you adored them for their *sang-froid* and cockiness. And then *les garçons* flipped a switch during intermission and turned into an astonishingly sophisticated pop/jazz group (*chouette alors!* — turn down the lights and break out the cabernet!)

You know it's going to be an odd evening when the “dissonant” introduction to Mozart's K. 465 quartet goes by without much of a ripple but the happy-sunny musical events that follow raise multiple eyebrows. Playing with a steely tone and controlled vibrato, the group bent rhythms to the point of quirkiness, made extreme contrasts in dynamics and were so physical in their approach to the music that they nearly rose out of their chairs for strong attacks and occasionally stomped feet to mark climaxes.

Mendelssohn's f minor quartet, op. 80, is angry and resentful in nature, but the ébène made it violent as well from the very opening gestures. And angular. And mercurial. And raucous. And at the end, quite frankly ugly. Also remarkably exciting, and the playing made a strong impression on the crowd, judging by the pre-intermission ovation.

In the second half, things calmed down considerably as the gods of jazz cooled the proceedings down. A long, ruminative cello solo melted into Errol Garner's *Misty*, followed by a Wayne Shorter tune, Nat King Cole's *Nature Boy*, the theme from *Pulp Fiction* in a vigorous, rock-style arrangement, Brad Mehldau's *Unrequited*, Miles Davis's *Old Blues*, the Beatles's *Come together* and Ástor Piazzolla's *Libertango*.

These were all the quartet's own arrangements, and they were arresting — sometimes straightforward and transparent, other times so abstract and nearly atonal (like *Libertango*) that the original material seemed buried and obscure.

Cellist Raphaël Merlin was a droll, comedic emcee for the second half of what he called “this very strange concert”, and violist Mathieu Herzog, who had before seemed aloof and abstracted, hilariously goaded the audience on to applaud particularly fine breaks by his colleagues.

At the end of this nearly two-and-a-half-hour concert, Quatuor ébène had left an indelible impression — four splendid musicians at home in a variety of styles who are not afraid of sawing off the limb they're sitting on when it comes to interpreting the classic repertoire, and who definitely aren't musical snobs. Name another string quartet who could — or would — break into a lovely French version of *Someday my prince will come* from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, singing in four-part harmony and accompanying themselves. Without irony. Amazing.

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