

PERFORMING ARTS

Six by Four: Too Seldom Heard

One genre that is seriously neglected in American musical life—more neglected, even, than baroque cantatas or medieval sequentiae—is string quartets composed by members of the French group Les Six in the early 20th century.

This is curious because we recognize Les Six as an important historic phenomenon, and some of its members—notably Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud and Arthur Honegger—are ranked among the century's most interesting composers.

The reason for this neglect may be that the quartets of this group are overshadowed by those of Debussy and Ravel, music of similar vintage and incomparable brilliance. That relationship was evident Sunday night at the National Gallery when the Parisii Quartet played a movement of Ravel's Quartet as an encore, following a program titled "Selections From the Works of 'Les Six.'" Ravel's color and vitality had an enormous impact, even following the energetic, emotionally powerful

String Quartet No. 3 of Honegger.

The Parisii (four Parisians, as their Latin-derived name suggests) specialize in music of the 20th century, with an emphasis on French composers. This is not a specialty for the fainthearted, and they bring to their chosen repertoire a mastery of style and technique, a fine-tuned coordination and a freshness of vision that argue the merits of this music persuasively. Besides Honegger, their program included the richly inventive Quartets No. 4 and 6 of Milhaud, the evocative String Quartet of Germaine Tailleferre, and the deeply expressive String Quartet No. 2 of Louis Durey, a composer who managed to balance a rather conservative musical style with radical political ideas.

The program confirmed the conventional wisdom, which finds Milhaud and Honegger more important than Durey and Tailleferre, but it created the impression that they, too, should be heard more often.

—Joseph McLellan