

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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The Parisii String Quartet: Arguably One Of The World's Best

REVIEW MUSIC

By George H. Pro

THOSE St. Louisans who braved the cold Monday night to hear the fifth concert of the Great Performances Ethical Series were treated to not only a North American debut, but also to a relatively new group. The Parisii String Quartet was formed in 1984 and has since won three international competitions and has toured extensively in Europe and the Far East.

Not surprisingly for a thoroughly French ensemble, the entire program was devoted to French literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The program moved from the sardonic world of Milhaud to the chromatic craft of Franck and finally to the strangely colorful palette of Ravel. The contrast was ravishing; so was the playing.

The three-movement Quartet No. 4 of Milhaud provided a terse, stunning opening. From the sweep of the first violinist's opening phrase, the quartet's artistry was apparent.

Their taut ensemble moved as one; each player was supremely sensitive to the other parts and the predominant idea. Rhythms were sharp and beats never rushed. As Milhaud layered dissonance on top of consonance, tart colors emerged in just the right proportions.

Franck composed largely piano and organ music, but fortunately he did leave us three chamber music compositions, of which the Quartet in

D Major is one.

Based on simple melodies and their excursion through many tonalities, the Quartet is in places reminiscent of the great Franck D minor Symphony. The Parisii played it with sweep, sensitivity, and effective dynamic contrast. Notable also was their warmth of tone quality; even in the dynamically full sections, the tone was always singing, never hard or scratchy. Especially effective was the hushed, impish Scherzo movement.

The Ravel Quartet in F Major is a test of any string quartet. Influenced by both the impressionist style of Debussy and the tight neoclassic structure as found in Mozart, it must come across as a series of cascading colors very sensitively handled, and with great dynamic changes.

The Parisii Quartet was up to the task. The opening theme, which is the genesis for much of the work, was taken at a more relaxed pace than usual, but still effective. Often,

however, the time taken at the ends of phrases to mark the color changes was a bit excessive, with a resulting lack of coherence to the first movement. The second movement, "Assez vif," had a wonderful buoyant swing, and the haunting viola solo in the "Tres lent" third movement could not have been more expressive. The slow movement from Debussy's String Quartet served as the encore, beautifully played, *con sordino* (with mutes).