The sublime pleasures of the New England String Quartet

NEW ENGLAND STRING QUARTET
A concert of works by:
Dmitri Shostakovich, Beethoven & Schumann.
UMass Boston, McCormack Hall. Friday, October 2.

By DAVID M. J. SASLAW

This was a fine art, musically and visually. The blackness of Dmitri Shostakovich's music; the black and amber color of a cello, viola, and two violins; four women dressed entirely in black; the serenity; the entire drama set against an all-black backdrop; divine sounds emerging as if from one huge stringed instrument.

This was the New England String Quartet, performing string quartets of Beethoven and Shostakovich, then evening with MIT's own, imitable Marcz Zdowskii to play Schumann's brilliant Piano Quintet, at the Harbor Campus of UMass Boston on Friday night.

Throughout the evening one was struck by the unity of the performers, the exacting care with which attacks and cutoffs were executed, and the intensity of the communication amongst the ensemble. No passages were undertaken without consultation, no chords were released except simultaneously. The group's use of body movement and eye contact played an essential role in this communication amongst the audience and strict cohesion from her colleagues, no chords were released except simultaneously.

The tempo of the evening came with the Quartet No. 8, subtitled "In memory of the victims of fascism & war" by Dmitri Shostakovich. Idiomatic folk figures coiled with the main theme of a pre-war era, making for a memorable performance. The stark realities of Shostakovich's nightmares were given full force by each member of the ensemble. Shostakovich's heavy, high, and warped tonalities were masterfully executed, the end result being a relentlessly somber, saturnine tone that resonated through the remainder of the recital.

The absence of movement breaks in this piece, combined with the intense concentration of the four performers, afforded no opportunity to have the edge of the seat. The highest praise, no doubt, was the audience's reaction at work's end, applause that was withheld until after a long contemplative silence. Only as the players stood was the spell broken.

After intermission, MIT affiliated artist Mark Zdowskii joined the Quartet for Schumann's luminous Piano Quintet, Op. 44. Zdowskii's approach was less frenetic; he refused to blur or intrude at any time with a piano part that frequently overpowered. Here, it was the piano's voice to win or lose, and of course, they won.

The tempo taken for the first movement (marked Allegro brillante, and my favorite) was too fast; the frenetic pace seemed almost to cause the players to waver, harmonies and melodies to blur. Less pedaling would have helped at times as well; even so, this section was tense, the momentum quickening, the movement on the whole a romantic success.

The more conventionally paced second movement was at times strikingly slow. Though the ensemble remained largely in synch, in its large part, the care taken to maintain eye contact with the others by Zdowskii, with his help the movement at least retained its poignancy. The scherzo — with its vivace third movement, however, was a shining example of meticulous playing all around. Zdowskii's precision-crafted fingers that seemed almost never to leave the keyboard (was that a third arm that shot up to the score between sixteenth notes on the score) produced a rich, warm sound.

Closing the piece and the evening was the inner intellectual movement marked Allegro, ma non troppo, again, taken rather faster than I am used to, but for this time the increase in speed served only to add elegance and cohesion to the piece's infrastructure. A certain relish comes in a way to that sensed in the Shostakovich, and perhaps the sense of Almoguer, with each connecting transition highlighted as dramatically as the connected passages themselves. Intense set warm, thoughtful yet delectable, the climactic fugue served as a final salutation to the genius of Schuman, a final assiduity of the grand scale by these accomplished young players on this wonderful evening.

Newcomers to the new as well as the many MIT students who made the trip to UMass Boston to hear this concert — each took back to Cambridge the sensation of having been brought about by rapid growth of our MRI product line. These individuals will work at our Clinical Science Center and on-site with our new research part-...