EMERSON STRING QUARTET

By DAVID ZAPOL

The Emerson Quartet—violinists Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, violist Lawrence Dutton, and cellist David Finckel—have risen to prominence over the past 15 years, recently receiving the Grammy Award for best classical record of 1990 and Gramophone Magazine's record-of-the-year award for their recording of the complete Bartok String Quartets. The quartet has a teaching and performance residency at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford.

Friday's concert at Jordan Hall opened with a rather weak performance of Haydn's Quartet in E-flat Major. The performance lacked the jovial mood expected of the work. The performers seemed to be overly concerned with giving a performance in the "style of Haydn" and, as a result, the piece sounded restrained. The third movement, perhaps the most humorous movement of the quartet, was played seriously with only interjected spurs of random humor, approximating dirty jokes at a cocktail party.

Mozart's A-Major Quartet was somewhat more lively, but still lacked the excitement expected from a world-class quartet. The group played as though it had a deadline to meet: They ran through the piece with seemingly little connection to the music, one another, or the audience. Their performance gave little hint of what was to come.

After intermission, Drucker, who had played second violin for the Haydn and Mozart pieces, took over as first violin, and quickly showed his skill as a leader. Bartok's Quartet No. 1 was tremendous. From the first note, it was clear that the quartet seemed more comfortable than before. The performers lost their previous inhibitions. Because of the piece's modernity, the quartet could pour into it all of its ideas, energy, and emotion without concerning themselves with traditional interpretations. The players' enthusiasm made their tone forceful and kept them alert and together. Everything they did showed the intensity of the performance—the way they looked at each other, the way they flailed their bows, the way they closed their eyes and played without reservation.

The performers' energy overwhelmed the audience. The momentum that had begun in the Bartok carried over to their encore, a movement from the Mozart quartet that Mozart left unfinished—the "end" of the piece comes mid-phrase. The quartet's energy and Mozart's truncated genius left the audience in awe, wishing the first half of the concert could have been performed with the same vitality and enthusiasm.

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