

By DANIEL BUCKLEY
Citizen Music Critic

Sunny, witty Mozart, an evocative world premiere and lively, dancing Dvorak earned the Muir String Quartet an enthusiastic standing ovation from the full house at last night's Arizona Friends of Chamber Music concert.

The Boston group's performance of Mozart's K. 428, E-flat Major quartet was everything you'd want - light and limber, precise and poised but never precious or overly formal. The piece set the tone for the evening, showcasing the group's meticulous attention to phrasing and detail, as well as its personality and ability to infuse just the right degree of heart and wit. Individual technique was as impeccable as the ensemble sound, and when themes were passed from instrument to instrument, the phrasing was perfectly matched to the finest degree. It was particularly amazing to hear them toss off the hiccups of the zesty final movement with the timing of a practiced stand up comic.

These four smile a lot when they play. How could you not when you're so on top in every aspect from conception to execution? Some groups make it look easy. Muir makes it look fun.

Joelle Wallach's String Quartet 1999 "In the slight ripple, the mind perceives the heart," received the same attention to detail and expression that the Mozart had, though the sonic fabric was very different. The two movement, roughly 12-minute work began in probing, shadowy harmonies, the music moving in unexpected directions, stirred up periodically by little dancing eddies. The opening movement in particular pit formation-flying violins over more independent bottom string figures, the ensemble and solo elements perfectly balanced so as to reveal the full texture in transparent relief.

The second movement was more lyrical and cast more in post-romantic harmonies, but with a highly inventive way of treating the material. Wallach seemed to be freely transforming and reshaping the themes across temporal and cultural boundaries, referencing classical counterpoint, folkish traditions, and sacred music of the west and Middle East to come to a kind of personal, if uneasy, peace. It was complex, but eloquent music that spoke to the appreciative crowd. The piece, which received its world premiere last night, was commissioned by AFCM.

Muir capped the night with a spirited account Dvorak's Quartet in C Major, Op. 61 that reveled in its romance and delighted in its Czech rhythms. The group brought a radiant yet courageous heart to its pening movement, capturing its dramatic accents and taut Bohemian syncopations to perfection. The second movement saw impish impulse and rich expression contrasted to great effect, while in the final movements, the foursome poured on the energetic life to both the music's drama and jubilant spirit, whipping the discerning crowd to explosive applause.

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