

The Washington Post

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Britain's Doric Quartet shows off knife-edged sound at Phillips Collection

**By Charles T. Downey, Published:
November 12**

A young string quartet may distinguish itself by its unusual sound, an unconventional choice of repertoire or an attention-catching gimmick. The gimmick groups generally fade in short order, but Britain's Doric Quartet showed the first two, more enduring distinctions during a concert Sunday afternoon at the [Phillips Collection](#).

For the somewhat unexpected program, cellist John Myerscough thanked the organizers of the Phillips series, who gave the Doric greater freedom by not insisting on any tried and true audience pleasers. The group's fine recordings for the Chandos label have included discs devoted to Erich Korngold and William Walton, but it chose instead the Quartet in C Minor, Op. 35, by Ernest Chausson.

It gave its first movement a searing intensity, the chromatically inflected sense of pining contrasted with a blithe middle section. The four musicians moved with a near-faultless cohesion, giving the middle movement a sentimental quality and the third a slightly harried, dancing propulsion.

They also chose to highlight Benjamin Britten with the Quartet in C, Op. 36, a work well served by the Doric's energetic approach, grinding out maximum power of sound in the first movement, which could have been calmer, and pushing the second movement beyond agitation and into panic.

The secret to the group's knife-edged sound is an avoidance of vibrato, which intensifies the piquancy of harmonic structures but also causes some infelicities of intonation. This clean, almost strident sound worked best in Schumann's Quartet No. 2 in F, Op. 41, which the [Doric](#) also played at its Washington debut, at the Library of Congress in 2010. Fluid rubato animated the piece, giving an introspective wistfulness to the first two movements, and it ended with a mad dash of a finale.

Downey is a freelance writer.

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