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Doric String Quartet, Wigmore Hall, London

By Richard Fairman

Subtle yet responsive readings of Haydn, Bartók and Schubert show why this ensemble has been so durable

Staying power is crucial in the world of string quartets. The supply of first-class players far outstrips demand and it is a sign of the resilience of the Doric String Quartet, formed in 1998, that it has continued onwards and upwards from its early successes in competitions to major awards for its recordings over the past few years.

Its most recent programme at Wigmore Hall was a fairly routine line-up of Haydn, Bartók and Schubert, but the playing itself was not routine in any way. This is the programme, with occasional changes, that the Doric String Quartet will be touring around the UK and Scandinavia until its next Wigmore appearance at the end of April and it is one worth catching.

The questing, restless Haydn String Quartet in F minor, Op.20 No.5, immediately introduced a colour and atmosphere personal to this ensemble. The first violin, Alex Redington, has a distinctive sweetness to his tone, allowing the darker colours of viola and cello a potent influence in the mix of sound, and sometimes he leads his three colleagues into the softest, most withdrawn playing. Their performance of the Haydn was unusually introspective, but always alive.

In Bartók's Second String Quartet it was the quickness of response that was impressive. The fast-changing motifs of this music demand an ability to pinpoint each new feeling with speed and unanimity. Once again this was Bartók with a distinctive tone – the hard-edged concentration and driving rhythms of an ensemble like the Emerson Quartet gave way to softer playing here – but the shifting, subtle colours were constantly on the move, dissipating into the eerie scampering of spectral figures at the close of the “capricious” second movement.

After the interval Schubert's “Death and the Maiden” Quartet swept along irresistibly. As though a culmination of all that had gone before, this performance summed up the Doric String Quartet's style of subtle lyricism and perfect matching of colour and phrasing, as the first violin again led the musicians in an exploration of the most intimate corners of the score. There was some high-quality quartet playing in this recital and the encore – Sonata III from Haydn's *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze* – was fully deserved.

