

NU's new Galvin Hall, Dover Quartet work splendidly in concert

October 8, 2015

By John von Rhein

A new concert facility and a new resident string quartet have made Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music a prime center of attention this fall.

Both the Mary B. Galvin Recital Hall and the Dover Quartet surpassed expectations Wednesday night when the impressive young American ensemble gave the inviting new auditorium its concert baptism. The program marked the beginning of the quartet's three-year residency at the Bienen School, a residency that is to include a concert each academic term, coaching sessions with student ensembles, master classes and open rehearsals. It augured well.

First of all, it must be said that Galvin Recital Hall, one of three performance and rehearsal rooms in NU's Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Center for the Musical Arts, is an architectural and acoustical gem. With comfortable seating for 408 people, the intimate, two-level auditorium sounds as pleasing to the ear as its burnt-caramel color scheme looks to the eye.

The most striking visual aspect rises up some 30 feet at the back of the stage, a double-thick wall of steel-reinforced glass facing out onto Lake Michigan. It afforded Wednesday's audience with a stunning panoramic view of twinkly city lights and even the occasional lakefront jogger.

Retractable acoustical sheets within the wavelike "ribbons" at the curving side walls allow the sound to be modified from performance to performance. The acoustical engineers of Chicago-based Kirkegaard Associates in fact were said to be making adjustments just days before the concert. While minor modifications may be in the offing, the Kirkegaard team must be very pleased with the overall results.

The sound as heard from front and rear locations struck me as clear and well-balanced, rather on the dry side but not unpleasantly so. It felt most appropriate for the works on the concert's first half where textural lucidity is crucial — Mozart's "Hunt" Quartet (No. 17 in B flat) and Henri Dutilleux's "Ainsi la nuit."

I would have preferred hearing Schumann's Quartet No. 1 in A minor (Opus 41, No. 1) in a somewhat warmer acoustical setting, although the clarity of counterpoint and fine degrees of timbre and dynamics exposed by the room's ambience were much to be appreciated in the Dover's fine performance.

Winner of the grand prize and all three special prizes at the 2013 Banff International String Quartet Competition, and a standout at the 2014 and 2015 Bienen School Winter Chamber Music festivals, the Dover

Quartet players have it in them to become the next Guarneri String Quartet — they're that good. Expert musicianship, razor-sharp ensemble, deep musical feeling and a palpable commitment to communication made their performances satisfying on many levels.

Their Mozart thrived in the bright, hard clarity of the Galvin Hall sonics. Quick conversational pages took on added urgency by virtue of the whistle-clean ensemble playing of Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violins; Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, viola; and Camden Shaw, cello. Yet their hearty vigor was not achieved at the expense of precise intonation or smoothly shaped linear flow.

The seven linked sections of Dutilleux's "Ainsi la nuit" ("Thus the Night") were played with exacting control of tonal quality, balance and tuning but also a collective sensitivity to conveying the kaleidoscopic variety of color and atmosphere behind each minute musical gesture.

The Dover Quartet brought an assertive urgency to the Schumann that played up the music's extrovert vitality rather more than its inner warmth and lyricism: One had the sense that getting to the destination was more important to the players than lingering over passing pleasures. An exhilarating reading was the result nonetheless, notably in the Mendelssohn-like Scherzo and rapid-fire exchanges of the finale.

The Dover Quartet's 2015-16 series at Galvin Hall in Northwestern's Ryan Center for the Musical Arts will continue with concerts Jan. 10 and April 26. One hopes future program books will contain more information than Wednesday's skimpy leaflet.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/vonrhein/ct-dover-quartet-review-ent-1010-20151008-column.html>