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Concert Review

**Technically Sound but Uninspired**

Despite the international recognition and fame of the Elias String Quartet, the prestigious quartet unfortunately did not live up to their reputation as one of the most talented and lively musical groups of this generation during their performance in Richardson Auditorium. Following a performance in the world-renowned Carnegie Hall, the group of four international musicians—Sara Bitlloch (violin), Donald Grant (violin), Martin Saving (viola), and Marie Bitlloch (cello)—made time in their schedules to entertain a grateful and expectant audience at Princeton University. Perhaps these expectations were set too high. From the potentially stimulating music of Haydn to the emotionally provocative tunes of Schumann, the quartet’s renditions of these classical masterpieces were actually disappointingly stiff, with their musical gestures and attempts at connecting with the audience falling flat with only a few exceptions throughout the entire night.

In fact, the quartet may have been a little too self-assured, carrying themselves with a little too much self-importance and pride as they walked across the stage into their seats before beginning Haydn’s Quartet in E-flat Major. Their rendition consequently gave off an air of being all show with little substance, with their overly dramatic movements sometimes even detracting from the purity of the music itself. The four movements played by the Elias String Quartet were indeed technically sound, the players’ intonation and clarity of tone clearly displaying long hours of careful rehearsal, but the quartet on the whole lacked uniqueness, some kind of distinguishing factor that could present the piece in a new light and with newfound meaning.

One of the biggest frustrations of the night was the evident disconnect between the players and the audience. Before beginning the second piece, Janacek’s Quartet No. 2 (“Intimate Letters”), violinist Sara Bitlloch attempted to provide some background on the context of the music with regards to the composer’s unfulfilled relationship with a much younger woman, who apparently inspired some of his most magnificent works. Sara’s speech came out muffled, almost inaudible, and frankly unintelligible. Without doubt, the performance of this piece was the only true highlight of the night, but it was indeed a shame to miss out on the deeper feelings conveyed by Janacek’s boldly frantic and passionate melodies. The expressive tones and emotionally rich passages played on Sara’s violin gave the audience a glimpse into the reason behind the quartet’s purported excellence. Surely, had the entirety of the concert been played with such vivacity, there would have been no disappointments. Regrettably, however, the incomprehension of the violinist’s words simply added on more layers of frustration for the audience. Perhaps if all of the concert-goers had been able to hear what Sara had to say about the piece, the deeper nuances of the piece would have been appreciated as they should have been.

To close out the concert, the Elias String Quartet chose to play Schumann’s hauntingly beautiful Quartet in A minor. While the imitative polyphony of the piece, in which a similar melody seemed to bounce among all four players, had the potential to allow the group to exhibit their cohesiveness and introduce a lively interaction, their attempt at this musical conversation came across as forced and at points disconnected. A few passages from the movements were noteworthy and produced very pleasing harmonies, again showing off the true potential of the Elias String Quartet, but unfortunately not quite sustained throughout the entire concert.

By the end, many audience members were ready to depart, but the group finished off with an unlisted encore to presumably dazzle and delight the audience. The effort was futile; again, the words (this time spoken by Donald Grant) were inaudible to the audience, and although the introduction was apparently personally emotional to the violinist, the connection between the players and the audience fell quite short. Overall, it seems as though the Elias String Quartet has seen far better days than the one it had performing at Richardson Auditorium.