

Review: Henschel Quartet's powerhouse debut at UCLA

The Music Guild uses a quote from the Los Angeles Times in its promotional material that credits the organization with bringing some of the best groups in the world to the Southland. I don't know how old that quote is. The guild has been around for a quite a while and tends these days to function on the periphery, although with a devoted and sizable following.

It began 65 years ago as a chamber music series at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. It has long been peripatetic. This year, it's presenting its main series of six programs at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall, Cal State Long Beach and Cal State Northridge. The ensembles are not yet name brands. Monday, the Henschel Quartet from Germany played for the first time in California at Schoenberg.

The quote stands. This is, no question, one of the best groups in the world, a great string quartet, and its debut here was long overdue.

The Henschel was formed in 1994 by three siblings and a cellist. The violinists, Christoph and Markus Henschel, both play Stradivarius instruments. Their sister, Monika Henschel-Schwind, uses an oversize viola, a deep instrument that gives the ensemble an unusually rich and dark tone. The cellist, Mathias Beyer-Karlshoj, is a powerhouse. On Monday, the men wore identical pinkish orange ties -- which looked a

little hokey, but you can't have everything.

This is an ensemble of tremendous brawn. Schoenberg is a pretty good hall, but it works best with performers who can give a little extra. Monday, these four extraordinary players gave a great deal of extra.

They began with Mendelssohn's String Quartet, Opus 13, and they gave it a Beethovenian heft that didn't entirely suit the score, Beethovenian though Mendelssohn tried to be. The players may have still been finding their way acoustically in Schoenberg. They may not have been warmed up. Or Mendelssohn may not suit them, although the Henschel has recorded the composer's complete quartet literature.

The program ended with Beethoven's Opus 127, the first of his late quartets, and this performance's Beethovenian heft was extraordinary. So too was the delicacy when that was needed. And so too was the ethereal quality, which is essential to making late Beethoven make sense. For all his railing against the heavens, Beethoven always lands on the side of the angels.

I don't know of any string quartet as capable as this one of reaching the opposite extremes of bluntness and airiness. The flowing melodies in the first and last movements of

the Beethoven sailed through Schoenberg on wings. The slow, long variation movement operated throughout in mystery.

The Scherzo sounded as advanced as Bartók. Imagine, if you will, Arnold Schwarzenegger dancing on the head of a pin, and all the implications thereof, and you get an idea of the Henschel's accomplishment in achieving late Beethoven complete.

Also on the program was the First String Quartet by Erwin Schulhoff, written in 1924 when the Czech composer was 30. Of all the composers who perished in German concentration camps, Schulhoff may have had the most promise of a major career. He was a Modernist who treated Czech folk music with avant-garde techniques. He was also besotted with jazz. His voice was his own. **The energy in this early quartet is raw and thrilling. The Henschel's performance was commanding, making a gripping case for Schulhoff.**

The encore was the pizzicato-rich slow movement from Ravel's String Quartet. The performance was more German than French, but this was a very good night for the Germans. The plucked notes were ripe plums infusing the atmosphere with sonic perfume, and Ravel emerged larger than life.

The Music Guild caught a big one.

-Mark Swed