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Navigating a Course Among 4 Composers

By ALLAN KOZINN

The Henschel Quartet, from Germany, made news last month when it performed for Pope Benedict XVI at his residence in Vatican City. Since then it has returned to more conventional concert spaces, though on Sunday afternoon the quartet turned up at a bona fide New York mansion, the Frick Collection, for a demanding, stylistically varied program. Its musicians performed early-20th-century scores by Erwin Schulhoff and Samuel Barber, and standard repertory works by Haydn and Schumann.

These players — Christoph and Markus Henschel, violinists, and Monika Henschel-Schwind, violist (they are siblings), and Mathias Beyer-Karlshoj, cellist — moved easily among the four composers' styles. But the most transfixing aspect of their performance was a hefty tone, both individually and as an ensemble. In solo passages, each produced a seductively buttery timbre, and throughout the performances Mr. Beyer-Karlshoj drew a sound so uncommonly fat that his

instrument often sounded more like a double bass than a cello.

The quartet began with the least familiar of its four works, Schulhoff's Quartet No. 1 (1924) and made a powerful case for it. Schulhoff, a Czech composer who died at the Wülzburg concentration camp in 1942, was an eclectic, and in this quartet, chunky Stravinskian rhythms and acidic figures that would have been at home in Bartok are offset by unabashedly tonal, folksy dance themes.

The Henschel players melded these influences seamlessly and gave the amalgam an otherworldliness that, in the finale, took on a compellingly eerie quality.

Haydn's Quartet in G (Op. 76, No. 1) is immeasurably sunnier and lighter in texture than the Schulhoff, but it, too, draws amply on rustic folk rhythms. The flexibility in tempos that the ensemble brought to the opening Allegro con spirito was admirable, as was the humor it brought to the Menuetto, with its

whimsical pauses and stark dynamic contrasts. But appealing as these lively movements were, the heart of the performance was the Adagio sostenuto, played here serenely and with a choralelike solidity.

Barber's Quartet and Schumann's Quartet No. 1 were contributions to this season's celebrations of those composers' anniversaries: Barber's centenary and Schumann's bicentenary. The Barber had the most inconsistent performance here: its opening movement sounded slightly shrill at times, and more Ivesian than it should have. But the Adagio, in its original single-string texture, was a thing of beauty.

The Schumann, which closed the program, was couched in warm hues and played with irresistible energy and high spirits.



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