

Biava Quartet excels in deeply moving concert of Dvorak, Schubert

By Peter Jacobi
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The laudable Biava Quartet made its final 2009 IU Summer Festival appearance Thursday evening and proved, in the process, that it is not only an ensemble of very high quality but one that continues to get better.

The group — violinists Austin Hartman and Kyunsu Ko, violist Mary Persin and cellist Jason Calloway — came for the first time a few years ago brimming with ego. At the time, for Bloomington audiences, it served as second banana among visiting foursomes, the top spot held by the then better known and more seasoned Penderecki Quartet.

Acceptance seemed to even out by last summer, a benefit of acquired familiarity. This year, the Penderecki did not return. The Biava was called upon to fill the breach. It has done so, excelling in three concerts that featured a range of musical periods and styles: from Haydn to Mendelssohn, from Shostakovich to Ginastera, and — Thursday in Recital Hall — two glories of the Romantic period, Dvorak's A Major Quintet for Piano and Strings, Opus 81, and Schubert's C Major Quintet for Strings, D.956.

To accomplish the tasks, which they did most admirably, they invited the necessary fifth musicians, pianist Jeannette Koekkoek for the Dvorak and Csaba Onczay for the Schubert. The selections were wise and winning. In both cases, the add-on instrumentalist turned into a melded member of the clan versus a visitor trying to blend in. The results exemplified true teamwork.

The Dvorak bulges with gorgeous melodies and harmonies that make one sigh and settle comfortably and contentedly down into a seat, even though the wooden, slide-inducing Recital Hall seat one sat in was far from comfortable. Dvorak also introduces exciting contrasts that add stimulation to the listening experience, these in the form of ebullient and melancholy themes intermingled. The task for the quintet's performers is to highlight the contrasts while honoring the propulsive nature of this glorious score. And that, precisely and persuasively, is what the Biava and Koekkoek did, the pianist providing the firm foundation and the strings the effusive filler.

The Schubert, completed just seven weeks before the composer's death, has a deeper, darker quality than most string quintets because rather than an extra viola, it employs a second cello. The piece is a magical creation, at once introspective and impassioned. The tendency of some ensembles is to overstate the ardent in the score at the expense of the poetically quiet and perhaps also to focus on the sunshine in key passages while failing to recognize and voice the demons of despair that lurk in the music's shadows.

Those failings were not at all evident in the performance given by the Biava and Onczay. Theirs was a reading suffused with contemplative mood and emotional restraint, deeply moving.