

*The Morrison Artists Series presents
the Juilliard String Quartet
April 19, 3pm in SF State's McKenna Theater*



The Van Kuijk String Quartet, winners of the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, to appear on the Morrison Artists Series

*A Morrison Chamber Music Center post
from Artistic Director Richard Festinger*

Once every three years a cohort of highly accomplished young string ensembles converge on London's Marylebone district for the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition. Established in Portsmouth in 1979, the competition relocated to London in 1988 as the London International String Quartet Competition, and more recently was taken over by Wigmore Hall, well known today as Europe's premiere concert venue for chamber music. I was most excited to attend the 2015 competition, which took place March 24-29. My reason for attending was the inclusion of the Morrison Chamber Music Center Prize among the competition's trophies, a prize amounting to an invitation to perform on the Morrison Artists Series.



Top-ranked Van Kuijk Quartet from France

Partly owing to Wigmore Hall's stature, the number of competing quartets increased dramatically over the 2012 competition: this year 33 quartets submitted audio and DVD recordings, from which 12 were invited to London to compete, one of which withdrew due to a case of tendonitis. Of the 11 competing quartets, five reside in the USA, two in Britain, and one each in France, Germany, Switzerland and Spain; but the countries represented by the quartets' members hail from much further afield, including natives of Italy, Ireland, Hungary, Ukraine, China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore and Canada.

In the preliminary rounds, held at the Royal Academy of Music on Marylebone Road, each of the 11 competing quartets performed two separate recitals, each recital to include two works, so designated that over four days each quartet performed an early-to-middle-period Haydn quartet, a late Mozart work, a work composed between 1918 and 2000 (excluding the quartets of Dmitri Shostakovich), and a new work, commissioned specifically for the competition, by British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage (b. 1960).

On the basis of their performances in the preliminary rounds, six quartets were promoted to compete in the semi-finals, held at Wigmore Hall on March 28, in which each ensemble performed one Beethoven quartet (by chance we heard two performances each of the first two Razumovsky quartets, one of the third, and one of Opus 130).

A tie among the judges resulted in four quartets, rather than the customary three, being promoted to the final round, once again held in Wigmore Hall, on March 29. Here the choice of repertoire was up to the competing quartets, subject to approval, which resulted in two performances of Debussy, one of Ravel and one of Dvorak's Opus 106.



Verona Quartet, from Indiana, tied for 2nd Place

I'm hoping this lengthy description conveys something of what it's like to attend, in 6 days, 22 preliminary round recitals, two full-length semi-final programs, and the final; and that tally omits three full-length Wigmore Hall concerts during the week performed by previous competition winners, as well as lunch-time performances at several local venues by the competing quartets, for those with real stamina!

In fact, the total immersion in string quartet performances was revelatory in the opportunity to compare in detail the different quartets' styles of playing, as well as the differing qualities of individual players from one quartet to another. The exceptionally nuanced attention to phrasing, dynamics and articulation in most quartets' performances of Mozart and Haydn were a delight to hear; and it's the competitive circumstances, of course, that lead the quartets to cultivate and prepare such refined interpretations. Perhaps I may be a bit spoiled now – a robust and technically clean performance of classical quartet repertoire may no longer seem as satisfying after hearing just how much subtle inflection can be worked in to elevate a performance to a much higher plane.



The UK based Piatti Quartet tied for 2nd Place

Interestingly, in the semi-finals my sense was that, at least in the repertoire we heard, Beethoven, with his greater breadth and somewhat denser, more complex, and often more contrapuntal textures, appeared less susceptible to meticulously detailed shaping than the outwardly more simple surface of Mozart and Haydn. What is diminished in elegance and grace is recouped in greater scope and power.

Of the eleven competing quartets, no single one clearly stood out above the rest as an obvious first place winner – indeed, each quartet had its own unique and honed expressive personality – yet in the final round Sunday evening, the Van Kuijk Quartet's performance of the Debussy Quartet clearly outshone the other three finalists' performances. Theirs was a Debussy brimming with an amazing palette of color, each one seemingly just right for the particular theme, passage, or musical moment, like a canvas of Monet, where color as much as anything shapes form, and subtle contrasts of hue bring the work astonishingly to life.

So it is that the Van Kuijk Quartet, a foursome of young Frenchmen with an average age of 27½, are First Place winners in this year's Competition, and will appear in concert on the Morrison Artists Series in 2016 or '17 as recipients of the Morrison Chamber Music Center Prize. Our prize was first given in the 2012 Competition, to the Dover String Quartet, who appeared on the Series last May. We look forward to continuing our relationship with Wigmore Hall in the 2018 Competition.

I'll close with a reminder that the celebrated Juilliard String Quartet will appear on the Morrison Artists Series on April 19, 2014, performing works of Haydn, Beethoven, and the eminent Israeli-American composer Shulamit Ran. Don't miss this opportunity to hear one of the world's greatest chamber music ensembles. Please visit us at <http://morrison.sfsu.edu> to reserve your admission free tickets.