

Girls on top in Norway

Carlos María Solare enjoys an all-female final at Trondheim's quartet competition

SOMETIMES I FEEL that the traditional, four-men-in-black string quartet should be placed on the list of endangered species. Of the six groups that took part in the fifth Trondheim International Chamber Music Competition in September, just one belonged to the breed. With it and the one mixed ensemble eliminated during the first two rounds, we were treated to an all-female finale. It was a very interesting experience to follow the different groups through the three rounds, since they coped very differently with the mounting tension inherent in a competition.

The eventual winner of the first prize, the French Tercéa Quartet, started off with impressive assurance, its chords beautifully balanced, and with ideal clarity of articulation in Haydn's op.74 no.3, 'The Rider'. I liked the tremolo the players introduced in the

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slow movement (where Haydn wrote repeated semiquavers), and if the finale's *Schwung* wasn't quite Viennese, it was most definitely *très chic*. Their Debussy was uniquely idiomatic, as well as jaw-droppingly impressive, with a perfectly calculated build-up in the finale. Even the dampening of the cello's open strings at the end of movements was ideally timed.

The Tercéa's second round was equally commanding, its Mendelssohn op.13 very much of a piece, always with a sense of power held in reserve at the climaxes. The players' reading of the set piece – Rolf Wallin's *Curiosity Cabinet*, commissioned for the occasion – was also most cogent. Wallin's suite of eleven short movements is ideal for a competition. The individual parts are not really hard to pull off, but the whole is a veritable obstacle course of ensemble playing. I listened following a score, and not a single group was 100 per cent together.



Unfortunately, the Tercéa seemed not to be in best form for the last round. Haydn's op.20 no.2 produced some matter-of-fact playing, and Beethoven's op.95 'Serioso' sounded uncontrolled, with the leader, especially, forcing too much in sforzandos, to the detriment of sound quality. Nevertheless, the impression left by the first two rounds was enough for the quartet to win the first prize as well as the audience prize. (As jury chairman Levon Chilingirian wryly pointed out in his closing remarks, these two awards rarely go to one and the same ensemble.)

LISTENING TO THE British-Irish Finzi Quartet represented the opposite experience. Its first round (Haydn op.64 no.4 and Debussy) left the impression of a lesson well learnt, in spite of many nice touches, such as a charming lilt to the

Ländler-like trio of Haydn's menuetto. Since this group had two pieces in common with the Tercéa, comparisons could hardly be avoided in both the Debussy and Mendelssohn quartets, which in the Finzi's hands sounded tentative and piecemeal. Hearing that this quartet would go on to the finals came as a surprise. However, its improvement in the last round was such that it sounded like a different group altogether. Its 'historically informed' performance of Haydn's op.20 no.4 wasn't entirely convincing, needing more bowing intensity to compensate for the general avoidance of vibrato. However, the variations were extremely moving, and the players showed an appropriately earthy rumbustiousness in the finale. Beethoven's second 'Rasumovsky' Quartet started with two perfectly voiced chords and went from strength to strength through a tempestuous coda, ▶



The Tercéa Quartet (left) gave commanding performances, but the Belgian-Dutch EnAccord Quartet (below) arguably provided the most consistent level of performance



with the slow movement reaching high peaks of expressiveness.

The third finalist was the Belgian-Dutch EnAccord Quartet, and to my ears it provided the most consistent level of performance. The players underlined the Sturm und Drang character of Mozart's D minor Quartet K421, with tempos that were generally on the fast side, but never uncomfortably so (except maybe in the last movement's coda). Their Debussy in the first round was the third one that day, and the comparison with the Tercéa's beautifully blended sonorities was fascinating, the EnAccord being instead four contrasting voices, a realisation of Goethe's much-quoted description of a string quartet as 'a conversation between four cultivated people'. The beginning of Debussy's *Assez vite* made me sit up: finally a real viola solo! A constantly positive presence, the EnAccord's Rosalinde Kluck got my accolade for most assertive viola playing in this competition. Her contribution also made for a particularly exciting Mendelssohn A minor (again, the third performance that day), in which leader Ilka van der Plas

demonstrated that assertive playing and a beautifully velvety tone don't have to be mutually exclusive. In the third round, the EnAccord players were particularly alert to the capriciousness of Haydn's op.20 no.3, and finished with a most exhilarating reading of Beethoven's op.95, in which they exhibited an amazingly wide dynamic spectrum.

The jury – presided over by Levon Chilingirian and made up of Laura Samuel and Antoine Lederlin (both from the Belcea Quartet), pianist Bengt Forsberg (Sweden), cellist Christoph Richter (Germany), violist Matti Hirvikangas (Finland) and Trondheim's own Elise Båtnes (violin) – awarded the Finzi and EnAccord Quartets joint second prize.

OF THE ENSEMBLES that didn't go on to the final, I was most sad to see the American Aeolus Quartet depart. It gave a high-octane performance of Bartók's Fifth, well contrasted but missing some of the fourth movement's mystery. I especially enjoyed violist

Gregory Luce turning outwards for his many solos, *à la* Oskar Nedbal (and he is a similarly big man).

The Nordica Quartet, a local ensemble, exhibited some excellent virtues (enthusiasm being not the smallest of them), and its whole was more than the sum of its parts. However, some lack of experience showed, and the players still have to find their own voice. Alternating leadership didn't help, since the two violinists are very different.

And the four men in black? Poland's Interface Quartet survived a weak first round only to be kicked out after a much better second round. Its choice of Mendelssohn's op.44 no.3, which shows the composer in his most tiresomely note-spinning vein, surely didn't help, although leader Krzysztof Specjal's virtuosity was amazing. The four players were very convincing in Wallin's piece, but failed to get into the unique atmosphere of Shostakovich's no.8, and their Haydn was quite monotonous, cellist Grzegorz Krawaczak registering as the most interesting player.

As well as the competition, which took place during the day, evenings were filled with concerts of the uniquely adventurous Trondheim Chamber Music Festival. Composer-in-residence Osvaldo Golijov was represented in almost every concert with orchestral, vocal and chamber music. The atmosphere at the sold-out Dock House during a late-night performance of Golijov's song cycle *Ayre* was palpably intense. In between sessions I took the chance to get acquainted with that country cousin of the viola d'amore, the Hardanger fiddle, at the nearby Ringve Museum.



The British-Irish Finzi Quartet improved dramatically in the final round