

Atrium Quartet,
Santa Fe, NM
St John's College

"LISTEN UP", by James M. Keller

"If Hahn left listeners hungry, the Atrium String Quartet served a satisfying feast on Feb. 22 at St. John's College. Formed in 2000 at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and now based in Berlin, the group is not yet famous in the United States, but that should change. They are, after all, young by string-quartet standards. Their performance was the opposite of Hahn's; notwithstanding their technical proficiency, these players were there to take a stand on musical masterpieces. They opened with Beethoven's F-Major Quartet (op. 18, No. 1), displaying excellent ensemble skills that fell perfectly into place during the repeat of the first movement's exposition, applying slight elasticity to phrasing to underscore musical points. They brought a broad emotional scope to the *Adagio* movement, responding to the composer's marking of "affectionately and passionately"; the *sforzando* outbursts by second violin and viola in unison achieved fierceness without overstepping the bounds of musicality.

The group continued with Debussy's String Quartet, a work so overexposed that it can easily putter past without making much of an impression. No chance of that here. Rather than focus on lovely blend in homophonic chords, which is what we usually hear, the Atrium Quartet made the opening movement commanding, sultry, and dangerous: think of Bette Davis in *The Letter*. The group's tone was carefully blended, though the performing space (in which no seat was empty) did not provide much resonance, and many listeners will have experienced an unaccustomed immediacy of close-up string sound.

This worked to the ensemble's further advantage in Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 3. Shostakovich is a specialty of the group, which has recorded several of his chamber works and is programming all 15 of his quartets from now through 2015. The Third, from 1946, is the first really breathtaking entry in his register of quartets. Although the movements as published look innocent enough in their dispassionate movement headings -- just tempo markings, actually -- Shostakovich was said to have attached descriptive headings to each of them: "Calm unawareness of the future cataclysm" for the first, "Rumblings of unrest and anticipation" for the second, "The forces of war are unleashed" for the third, "Homage to the Dead" for the *Adagio*, and for the finale, "The eternal question -- Why, and for what?" He was probably wise to omit them from the published score, since Soviet officials made a habit of lighting into him at the slightest provocation. Indeed, the authority of this much-repeated lore has been questioned by scholars. But the fact remains that this quartet does sound as if it involves an aspect of programmatic narrative, and the Atrium four proved to be captivating storytellers. They were specific in conveying moods: naiveté in the first movement, edginess in the second, terror in the third. The foursome subtly adjusted its sound to achieve specific effects. One appreciated how the cello, after assuming a slightly reticent stance in the Beethoven, took on a velvety timbre in the slow

movement of the Debussy and still greater richness in the somber fourth movement of the Shostakovich. After the last bars of the finale sounded, the audience sat long in stunned silence before acknowledging the performers with a standing ovation that was, for a change, deserved."