

November 16, 2011

Mood, musicality and Minguet



SOUND SENSE: The Minguet Quartet. Photo: S.R. Raghunathan

The Minguet Quartet travelled across the ages with the compositions of Mozart, Rihm and Brahms

The road to a mature string ensemble is a long and arduous one. Since much of the charm of chamber music is to return the compliment of the other, four musicians who love to play string instruments with different voices often spend years in confrontation and conciliation, before the quartet achieves its own lucid character.

On day five of *The Hindu* Friday Review November Fest, The Minguet Quartet from Germany expressed their congeniality and craft in 'Across the Ages', a concert featuring the string quartets of Wolfgang Mozart, Wolfgang Rihm and Johannes Brahms.

Since its founding in 1988, the quartet has added to its accomplishments almost everything expected of an ensemble on the inevitable road to fame. Its members have been trained as soloists by celebrated teachers at international conservatories, performed at prestigious festivals across Europe and abroad, and have often been chosen by 21st Century composers to premiere their works simply because of their refinement of sound.

On stage at The Music Academy, Ulrich Isfort (first violin), Annette Reisinger (second violin), Aroa Sorin (viola) and Matthias Diener (cello), chose three melancholic pieces as if to paint the bitter-sweetness of the dying year. The music came through many layers, as often is the case with string quartets set in minor keys. It made for an intense performance, although one wished it could have included a few buoyant notes.

The first, *String Quartet No. 15 in D Minor* by that fecund genius Mozart, opened with an expressive, song-like quality that turned volatile as the movement progressed. One of six quartets dedicated to Haydn, this piece is a lot more sombre than most of Mozart's works. While the first

violin constantly embellished the melody, the other instruments echoed it taking the music through many paces — the old-fashioned romance of a cavalry charge, the freshness of a ride in the country and the mad abandon of a wild gallop.

Rihm's *String Quartet No. 11*, was more intense and organic with notes emerging of their own volition. The atonal music shifted unexpectedly from dance and poetry to discord and darkness with practised ease. The players addressed the music's acerbic demands with subtleties such as recurring motifs, differing tones and timbres. A difficult piece to perform as the music unfolds in charged, fiery stretches, the quartet trilled and strummed, plucked and bowed to display the sheer, raw intensity of Rihm's music.

The music of Brahms is often considered dark and brooding, but the quartet's selection of his *String Quartet in C Minor (Op. 51. No. 1)* in four movements, rounded off the concert on a cheerful note especially coming after two pieces that were melancholic and largely atonal. The violins sang the distinct polytonal harmonies while the viola and cello played mystical passages that combined a duskiess of tone with a warm resonance. Clashing chords and repeated riffs shaped the harmonies with a lightness of being.

The quartet's forte lies in preserving unity of sound through different voices — Isfort's playing is lustrous, Reisinger's is elegant, Sorin's is so expressive as to meld into the movement and Diener's is nuanced yet understated.

Their music is spirited, mature, perhaps even intoxicating. Rather like fine wine, come to think of it.