

NY Times
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A Debut From a Quartet With Works Old and New
02/19/00

Soon after the violinist Ida Kavafian and the cellist Peter Wiley left the Beaux-Arts Trio in 1998, they put together a new ensemble, the Opus One Piano Quartet, with the pianist Anne-Marie McDermott and the violist Steven Tenenbom. The group, which takes its name from a dog kennel that Mr. Tenenbom and Ms. Kavafian (who are married) operate in Connecticut, made a promising New York debut on Tuesday evening at Alice Tully Hall.

Judging from the mission statement in the group's biography, the program was a declaration of musical principles. The first half was devoted to recent works by American composers, in this case Ned Rorem, Aaron Jay Kernis and Stephen Hartke; the second offered a passionate, lushly textured and impeccably balanced account of the Brahms Piano Quartet No. 2 (Op. 26). The ensemble deploys itself flexibly: the first half of the concert included a violin and piano duo, a string trio and the full quartet. Chief among its strengths was a fully developed sense of interpretive unity in each of its configurations.

In Mr. Rorem's "Autumn Music" (1998), Ms. Kavafian was unfazed by demands that ranged from thick chordal playing to speedy passage work and an array of ornamentation. She played the violin line with passion and fire, and Ms. McDermott matched those qualities in a piano line that began as an eerily simple arpeggiated figure and blossomed into an essay in virtuosity and detail.

Mr. Kernis, whose works often grapple with the tragic side of the human condition, was represented by "Mozart en Route (A Little Traveling Music)," a light, short 1991 work that was uncharacteristic in every regard except its fluidity. It is jokily eclectic: quotations from

Mozart nestle up against blues fiddling and touches of modernist angularity. Ms. Kavafian, Mr. Tenenbom and Mr. Wiley gave it the buoyant, transparent reading it seemed to call for.

Mr. Hartke's piano quartet, "The King of the Sun" (1988), is cast in six movements with colorful titles drawn from Joan Mirò paintings. Mr. Hartke is adept at capturing imagery of this sort in sound. In "The Flames of the Sun Make the Desert Flower Hysterical," for example, he evokes that picture in a stroke with lightly dissonant piano chords set against a violent string tremolando.

The Opus One players were sensitive to the nuances of Mr. Hartke's coloration, and played the music with the same energy and sense of ownership that they brought to the Brahms.