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In Little-Trodden Territory, Ensemble Makes Its Statement

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The chamber music world is overflowing with ambitious string quartets and piano trios jockeying for attention, but there are very few groups out there devoting themselves solely to the repertory that falls between these forms: the piano quartet. The ensemble called Opus One therefore has an open field in which to roam, albeit a small one given the modest size of the literature.

It's a body of work that could probably not sustain a full-time ensemble, but the members of Opus One - Anne-Marie McDermott (piano), Ida Kavafian (violin), Steven Tenenbom (viola) and Peter Wiley (cello) - are busy musicians with plenty of other commitments on the city's chamber music scene. Mr. Tenenbom and Mr. Wiley, for example, are members of the Orion and the Guarneri string quartets, respectively.

Judging by the smiles darting above the music stands at their fine performance on Sunday afternoon in Town Hall, the musicians are clearly enjoying this collective busman's holiday. That makes a big difference for the listener, too: nothing is more dispiriting than watching miserable players saw away at music as exuberant as the Dvorak Piano Quartets (Op. 23 and 87), which the group performed Sunday and will soon be recording.

The ensemble's tone was warm and generous, and the players shifted seamlessly between eloquent solo statements and polished blending anchored by Mr. Wiley's rich bass lines. Between the Dvorak works, the group sharpened the edges of its sound for Martinu's Piano Quartet, a more astringent piece written during the composer's wartime sojourn in this country. An opening full of hard-driven folkish rhythms gives way to a slow movement of eerie hollowed-out chords and rustling piano figures that haunt the strings like a ghost in the machine.

The concert came as the penultimate event in the invaluable Free for All at Town Hall series. Perhaps next year the producers could consider adding program notes, which, if done in a lively way, would deepen the engagement of a crowd that usually includes a modest quotient of newcomers.

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