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Review: St. Lawrence Quartet and friends kick off Chamberfest in style

BY NATASHA GAUTHIER
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Chamberfest kicked off its 25th anniversary season Thursday night with the first of several concerts by the St. Lawrence String Quartet. Founded in Toronto just a few years before Chamberfest, the SLSQ has been part of the festival from the very beginning, and the ensemble's appearances this year feel very much like a kind of homecoming (the quartet even stars on this year's posters and program covers.).



BENJAMIN VERDERY. PHOTO: MITSUKO VERDERY

The Dominion-Chalmers performance on Thursday was billed as the SLSQ "and friends", the latter being guitarist Benjamin Verdery and pianist Stephen Prutsman. After the obligatory Haydn quartet, Op. 76 No. 5 — the SLSQ's devotion to Haydn verges on addiction — Verdery joined the quartet for the Canadian Premiere of *Quintet for High Strings* by American composer Bryce Dessner.

It's a snappy, immediately engaging work, sizzling with episodic ideas and no small amount of sentimental expression. Dessner uses extended techniques to create a rich variety of textures. At several points, the harmonics from the strings and the guitar seem to amalgamate into a wholly new sound, like an elusive sixth instrument has been added to the mix.

Verdery plays with the kind of infectious, childlike joy that lights up the whole stage, and the sheer pleasure the five virtuosos took in playing the Dessner couldn't help but enhance the audience's enjoyment.

If the first half of the program felt like a party, the second half was all business, with an intense, serious, transcendent performance of the Franck Piano Quintet. Led by an impassioned Geoff Nuttall and anchored by Prutsman's majestic pianism, the musicians emphasized the work's Gothic sense of dread and its oppressive, bourgeois decadence. There were some tuning problems with the piano, and in turn in the strings, perhaps caused by the afternoon's soaring heat and humidity.

On Saturday at 1 p.m. at the National Gallery, the SLSQ will give a talk and presentation on Haydn's string quartets, including a performance of the String Quartet Op. 20 No. 5.

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