

The Cultural Tourist - NY Daily News

Quatuor Ebene at Le Poisson Rouge

The last time someone put a paper bracelet around my wrist to admit me someplace was when I went to Roosevelt Emergency in December (where, by the way, I was given excellent treatment.) The last time someone actually stamped my hand to grant me entry had to be when I attended some dance as a teenager.

Both these things were part of the drill for entering Le Poisson Rouge, a nightclub that has opened in the space occupied for eons by the Village Gate. I went there last summer to hear the great pianist Simone Dinnerstein. And I went Wednesday night to hear a phenomenal French string quartet, Quatuor Ebene, perform.

As the cellist, Raphael Merlin, explained in charmingly broken English, it was their first day in New York. They had lunched at Planet Hollywood (I didn't know it was still in existence, but then my culinary tastes are not quite so perverse.) And now they were going to perform for us, first Haydn and Debussy, then, in the second half, jazz. In addition to Merlin, the group consists of Pierre Colombet and Gabriel Le Magadure, violins, and Mathieu Herzog, viola.

There was absolutely no evidence of jet lag in their performance. The Haydn, Opus 77, No. 2, was vivacious and elegant. They then tackled the Debussy string quartet. I have never heard it played more sensitively or more sensually or, for that matter, with more breathtaking precision. The quiet sections of the slow movement were particularly moving.



As soon as I got home I put on the new Virgin Classics disc on which they have recorded the three mainstays of the French chamber repertory, the string quartets of Debussy, Faure and Ravel. The Debussy is pretty stunning on disc but was even more overwhelming in person, perhaps because the setting was so intimate. Happily, although it is a night club there was no clinking of glasses or idle chatter -- the audience was as enraptured as I was.

Their jazz was relaxed and playful, yet equally forceful. Merlin plucked and thumped on his cello as if it were a bass. A piece by Chick Corea was particularly infectious. One of the pieces was a string quartet version of a theme from "Pulp Fiction." Even wittier was an arrangement that began with them singing in four-part harmony "Un Jour Mon Prince Viendra" ("Someday My Prince Will Come.") They then played a beautiful jazz treatment on their instruments.

It was an evening of extraordinary musicianship. The second half had a Gallic drollery that made it something special. On Friday, March 20 at 7:30 p.m. they are going to perform Mozart, Brahms and Ravel at Weill Recital Hall.

Repeated washing is making the black stamp on my palm (interestingly, it says, "Hercules") gradually disappear. But my introduction to this remarkable group of musicians I am sure will remain indelible.