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Cypress String Quartet: Attracted by the Opposites

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The Cypress String Quartet's performance on Wednesday at the German Embassy was an attractive combination of structured Apollonian restraint and unleashed Dionysian exuberance. This exciting San Francisco-based ensemble seems to understand that it is the constant back-and-forth between such opposites that lends music its energy.

At the start was Mozart's String Quartet in C, K. 465. The piece gained the name "Dissonance" because of its somber opening measures, which the quartet imbued with darkness and anguished tension. Yet the work's spirit derives as much from the contrast between this initial somberness and the ensuing sprightly textures. Cypress used confident technique and calibrated balances to capture the ebb and flow.

Elena Ruehr, an MIT music professor, has put together a strong piece in her String Quartet No. 4, which Cypress premiered in 2005. Ruehr writes music with heart and intelligence, and the ensemble's polished account highlighted the warm character and colorful instrumentation. Ruehr knows when to assign a singing phrase to the lead violin or a more churning accompanying figure to the inner voices. With its forceful sense of character and expression, particularly an alluringly melodic second movement aptly titled "Aria," one could easily forgive a slight long-windedness.

Cypress gave a beautifully proportioned and powerful reading of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13, to close out the concert. This was the Beethoven-obsessed Mendelssohn with aggressive swells and brooding rhythms set in high relief. The finale soared on the sonic remembrances of previously rendered material and a kind of kaleidoscope of rarefied harmonies and more earthy figures. Here again, freewheeling insouciance and more mannered organization reared their essential heads.

-- Daniel Ginsberg