

Bright lights in the city

Tim Homfray hears some captivating performances from young ensembles at the Wigmore Hall London International String Quartet Competition

THIS COMPETITION HAS TRAVELLED around over the years. Its latest home is Wigmore Hall, which officially took it over in 2010 and has given it both security and one of the more cumbersome titles on the world stage: the Wigmore Hall London International String Quartet Competition. It started life in Portsmouth in 1979 under the auspices of Yehudi Menuhin, with the first prize going to the Takács Quartet. Since then the competition has provided a launch platform for a handful of top-of-the-range ensembles, including the Hagen, Vanbrugh and Wihan quartets.

The 2012 event attracted 21 entrants, and most of the 10 who made it past the pre-competition stage already had pretty impressive CVs. After two recitals each, featuring Mozart, Haydn, Brett Dean's competition piece *Eclipse* and a piece written after 1918 (Bartók was a popular choice), six quartets went through to the semi-finals on 31 March. This was a Beethoven round – anything except op.18 and the *Grosse Fuge* was eligible.

These single-composer rounds make me slightly nervous: it is quite possible to have six performances of the same piece,

which even with Beethoven could be too much of a good thing. In the event, there were three versions of op.59 no.2. The first of them came from the Arcadia Quartet, a Romanian group founded in 2006. This was a tempestuous account, the first movement pressing forward and the last full of infectious exuberance. In between were a flowing and eloquent *Molto adagio*, with Beethoven's 'con molto di sentimento' instruction taken to heart, and a light *Allegretto*, urgent but with plenty of air, the Russian theme robust and enveloped in delicate tracery.

The Arcadia brought gentle beauty and emotional power to Mendelssohn

The Dover Quartet from the US followed, four years old, with an average age of less than 23 but with a clutch of prizes and a CD already in the locker. The first movement of op.132 in A minor was a muscular affair, full of subtle details of phrasing and pacing, and the *Allegro ma non tanto* had a leisurely sway. The great central

Molto adagio was sublime, with sustained playing and often minimal vibrato in the hymn section, and elfin lightness elsewhere. Vivid dynamic contrasts featured in the finale.

THE SECOND APPEARANCE of op.59 no.2 completed the first of the two semi-finals. Founded in 2003, the Gémeaux Quartet is officially from Switzerland, although the players are an international crew; only the second violinist is actually Swiss. This was a colourful and captivating performance, but some details were muddled or lost in the nervous energy of the first movement, and the players had differing opinions on how to play staccato in the second. They attacked Beethoven's fortissimos with gusto, and the finale was a galloping, joyous showpiece.

The second semi-final opened with – yes – op.59 no.2, this time in the hands of the Meccorre Quartet from Poland, a group formed in 2007. I heard this quartet last year in the semi-finals of the Geneva International Competition. They were good then, even though they didn't make the final, and they were good now, in a slightly stern reading full of authority and purpose. There was beautiful dovetailing between parts in the second movement, with everything vital but nothing over-emphasised, and with a clarity which was also a particular feature of the third movement. Every detail told, balance and texture were exemplary, and the whole was full of subtle colour and shape, leading to a finale of coruscating energy and drive.

The Piatti Quartet, founded in the UK in 2008, opted for the 'Harp' Quartet op.74. This was deftly played, though without quite the strength of communication of those who had gone before, more a delicate and subtle watercolour than a robust oil painting,



Balance and texture:
the Meccorre Quartet



The Arcadia Quartet performed with infectious exuberance

with some exquisite and moving playing in the slow movement.

Finally, the Tesla Quartet from the US, also founded in 2008, performed Beethoven's final quartet, op.135 in F major. There was poise, mystery and elegance in the first movement, and playing in the second that was at once strong and delicate, the staccato perfectly judged to both speak and bite, the fortissimo outbursts raw and vehement. There were a few technical blips along the way in the finale, but the slow movement had ethereal beauty.

THE JUDGING WAS DONE by scoring rather than backstage table-pounding among the jury, and the finalists were those who had acquired the most points in both previous rounds. The Meccorre, Tesla and Arcadia made it to the 1 April final.

The Meccorre opened with a fine performance of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet. The first movement was shot through with tragedy – no light relief here at the

second subject – and the different characters of each second-movement variation were caught as powerfully as a set of pictures. The last movement went off like a rocket, grim and turbulent but with room for the odd shaft of sunlight.

The Tesla was technically superb in Debussy's Quartet, its performance full of urgency, colour and subtle dynamics. This was a masterclass in quartet technique, with great momentum in the last movement.

WIGMORE HALL LONDON INTERNATIONAL STRING QUARTET COMPETITION WINNERS

- First prize
Arcadia Quartet (Romania)
- Second prize
Meccorre Quartet (Poland)
- Third prize
Tesla Quartet (US)

The Arcadia brought gentle beauty mingled with emotional power to Mendelssohn's A minor Quartet op.13, in an immaculate performance full of essential Mendelssohnian lightness, especially from the first violinist Ana Török.

In the final, too, the winner was the group with the highest tally across the three rounds. The Arcadia won, the Meccorre was second and the Tesla third, with a package of money, concerts and recordings shared out between them. There was a whole raft of other prizes besides, enough for a page of A4 in the programme, and even then one of them was missing, an award for best Mozart performance in the first round, which went to the Meccorre. Most of the other prizes also went to the finalists, but the Dover picked up one from the Morrison Chamber Music Center in San Francisco.

Wigmore Hall's director John Gilhooly pointed out at the prize-giving that, win or lose, such a competition constitutes 'just one snapshot in your career'. Perhaps, but it's definitely one for the album. ■