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Review: Great performance on a farewell tour

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BY BARBARA ZUCK
For The Columbus Dispatch

The Vermeer String Quartet returned to the Southern Theatre last night for its third appearance under the auspices of Chamber Music Columbus. That the group has announced its retirement at the end of this year gave the evening a tinge of sadness; one regrets the loss of a fine and experienced ensemble with such a mellow, Old World persona.

Perfect balance and beauty of tone marked the rendition of the opening selection, *Schubert's Quartet in E-Flat Major*, Op. 125, No. 1. The unhurried tempos and emphasis on lyricism suited the ensemble perhaps a bit better than the work itself, which, while beautifully played, lacked spunk.

The Vermeer poured more energy into the rarely heard *Quartet No. 1 in E Minor* by Frank Bridge.

And the talents of all four players - violinists Shmuel Ashkenasi and Mathias Tacke, violist Richard Young and cellist Marc Johnson - came much more to the fore here than in the more treble-dominated quartet of Schubert.

The cellist's exploration of the instrument's upper range and the violist's many strong articulations of main themes were especially impressive, but the quartet's impeccable sense of ensemble and faithful adherence to the will of the composer were maintained throughout this busy, contrapuntal piece.

The highlight of the concert, however, came in the understated, quite

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The highlight of the concert, however, came in the understated, quite spellbinding performance of Shostakovich's *Piano Quintet in G Minor*, Op. 57. Here the Vermeer was joined by Ohio State University pianist Caroline Hong, who previously collaborated with the group on its most-recent concert in Columbus two years ago.

Given the personality of the Vermeer, this reading eschewed histrionics in favor of a pensive, sober interpretation of Shostakovich's wide-ranging quintet. Best by far was the gradual buildup of intensity in the *Fugue*, begun ever so softly and carefully by Ashkenasi and escalating from there for the most dramatic music-making of the night.

The players rightly never let go of the steady tempo, however, deliberately maintaining the note, note of the theme and thereby slowly, inevitably unleashing its power. Hong's elegant, sensitive playing complimented the Vermeer in every way, never overpowering, working in perfect balance as though she played with the quartet every day.

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