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At the heart of the Highlands

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Style and passion from the Carducci String Quartet

By KM

THE Carducci String Quartet opened the Inverness Chamber Music Society's new season of concerts with a performance that combined stylish elegance with passionate commitment.

The group have come a long way in a relatively short period, and now stand firmly among the cream of the younger chamber groups in Britain.

Alison Marr, the new Chairman of the ICMS, affirmed the Society's commitment to remaining at the Town House "for the foreseeable future", citing the excellent acoustics among the principal reasons for their loyalty to the venue. That perception was confirmed again when the group took to the stage with Haydn's "String Quartet in D major, Op. 24, No. 4".

Their playing set the high standard they maintained throughout the recital.

The work divides neatly into two rather sombre, elegant movements followed by two more lively and robust ones, suffused with Hungarian influences. Each movement was scrupulously characterized as well as beautifully played, and provided another reminder of precisely why Haydn's quartets are regarded as the cornerstone of the repertoire.

It was followed by a very different work, Janacek's "String Quartet No. 1, The Kreutzer". It was inspired by Tolstoy's novel "The Kreutzer Sonata", which in turn took its title from Beethoven's sonata of that name, a work which plays a pivotal role in the novel and is quoted briefly in this quartet.

It is biting, intensely passionate music, and the players — violinists Matthew Denton and Michelle Fleming, viola player Eoin Schmidt-Martin and cellist Emma Denton — extracted the full measure of emotional and musical drama in a performance of sustained depth and expressiveness.

They closed with Beethoven's "String Quartet in E minor, Op. 59, No. 2", a revolutionary work that threw the best musicians of its day into confusion.

No such problems arose for the Carducci's, and their assured and authoritative performance was rounded out with a very different encore, Astor Piazzolla's "Four, for Tango", a rarity in the Argentinean's output in being actually composed for a string quartet (the Kronos Quartet) rather than his own tango group.

Matthew Denton's enthusiastic and occasionally eccentric introductions were a feature of the concert, and a useful palliative to the notion that classical musicians must remain somewhat aloof from their audiences.

That outmoded habit is now disappearing, and the group demonstrated that a more informal approach to presentation need not infringe on the quality or seriousness of the music.