

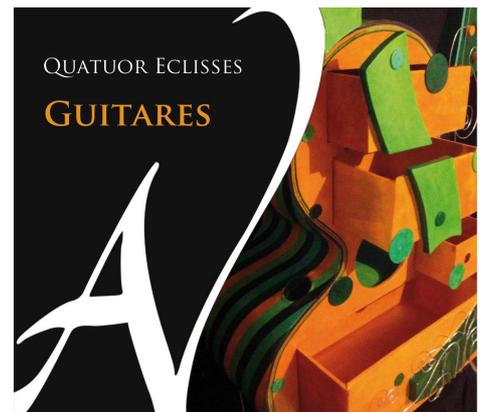
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Quatuor Éclisses: Guitar quartet with power

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The late, great Andrés Segovia once likened the classical guitar to “a small orchestra” for its huge range of coloristic effects. But it’s probably wise not to take the analogy too literally; the operative word here is “small,” and compared with an actual orchestra, the guitar has all the power of a bag of kittens. Transcribing big symphonic works to its delicate, miniaturist scale is fraught, as they say, with peril.

But it can be done, as the Quatuor Éclisses, an engaging young guitar quartet out of Paris, proved Sunday afternoon at the Phillips Collection. Not a lot of music has been written expressly for four guitars, so the Éclisses turned to transcriptions of (mostly) orchestral works, from the operatic (the Overture to Rossini’s “Le siège de Corinthe”) to the baroque (a forgettable Telemann concerto and two movements from Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 4) to the elaborate tone-painting of Saint-Saëns’s “La Danse Macabre.”

To their credit, the musicians brought it off with polished charm and virtuosity. The Rossini was the least convincing work on the program, its episodic structure and quick shifts of tone not really adding up to much. But the Bach was a wonder of clarity and sure, unstoppable power. Every line of the complex counterpoint radiated electricity. It was balm for the ears and food for the mind.

It was in the French music of the afternoon, though, that the Éclisses turned in its most poetic and nuanced playing. Even the clichés were gorgeous (Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” shimmered with light, as ethereal as you’ve ever heard it), and the Saint-Saëns, with its famous dancing skeletons, was a blistering display of guitar techniques.

But to these ears, it was the Spanish-flavored “Alborada del gracioso” (from Ravel’s piano work “Miroirs”) that provided the most impressive music of the afternoon. It was a rich, sophisticated interpretation of this thoroughly ravishing work.

Brookes is a freelance writer.