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## THAT DECISIVE MOMENT

### Kilted Quartet: The Week in Classical Music

Any ensemble making its American debut is likely to feel some jitters, especially when the program includes a masterpiece as dense and thorny as Beethoven's Op. 130. But on Sunday, members of the Maxwell String Quartet had an additional reason for feeling a little, well, vulnerable.

Addressing the audience at the New School, the group's cellist, Duncan Strachan, explained why. "I must say," he said, "this is a very high stage for kilts."

Flashes of thigh, and wit, are not the only reason to take note of the Maxwell Quartet, which hails from Scotland and advertises that fact both in its dress and in its repertory, which includes striking arrangements of folk music. (As the sole Englishman in the lineup, the violist Elliott Perks wore tartan trousers.) As Sunday's eloquent performance demonstrated, the players bring the same charisma and sense of adventure to their selections.

The slightly tart, resinous sound of traditional fiddle playing carried over beautifully into fresh readings of Haydn and into the Beethoven. But perhaps the most arresting moment was James MacMillan's "Memento" from 1994, in which wisps of a melody floated on hazy harmonies and coalesced into heaving sighs before dissolving again into ghostly strains, rendered with a kind of fierce tenderness. *CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM*

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