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When the Zurich-based **Stradivari Quartet** made its American debut at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (22 February), the programme book included detailed and fascinating histories of the group's instruments, all made by the ensemble's famous namesake. We learnt, for instance, that the 'King George' violin, played by the second violinist, Elisabeth Harringer, once belonged to a Scottish officer who was killed in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815; the instrument survived in his horse's saddlebag.

The Stradivari's programme included one Beethoven quartet from each of the composer's three periods, starting with the Quartet in A major op.18 no.5. There is a very polished sound to this group, yet its members' strong individual personalities shine through. In the extended third movement, first violinist Bartek Niziol led with assertive clarity, equally matched by violist David Greenlees's powerful

Refined sonority: the Stradivari Quartet



phrasing and plangent sonority. Cellist Maja Weber might have employed a richer timbre for the group's foundation, but she never lacked focus in her playing. Violinist Harringer complemented Niziol without merely fading into his shadow.

The 'Rasumovsky' Quartet in F major op.59 no.1 also revealed a refined sonority but with a more vigorous edge, and while signs of fatigue began emerging in the Presto of the Quartet in C sharp minor op.131, the evening otherwise revealed a formidable ensemble in peak condition.