

Stringing Along With Ethel

The fact that Ethel prefers to be called a band rather than a string quartet speaks to these musicians' pop tendencies, but we won't hold that against them. In the tradition of the Kronos and Turtle Island string quartets, violinists Todd Reynolds and Mary Rowell, violist Ralph Farris and cellist Dorothy Lawson are skilled players in a tight ensemble whether they are attacking an eclectic composition with electronics or digging into a 12-bar blues arrangement.

Ethel's Tuesday night WPAS concert at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater opened with Reynolds's "Uh . . . it all happened so fast." This bright work was played with a sense of urgency and the energy of a snappy jazz combo. Its locomotive effects transported the audience to the train on which the music was written.

Composer Neil Rolnick blended computer-generated sounds unobtrusively with the string instruments in his "Shadow Quartet." The effect was a pastiche of ethereal bell-like tones under beautifully lyrical solos and an ostinato of plucked strings.

In the spirit of cartoon composer Carl Stalling, John Zorn's thorny yet dramatic "Cat o' Nine Tails" zigzagged a range of emotions. The rapidly shifting styles from catfight to country fiddling to tango allowed the band to show off its versatility. Subtle lighting effects added to the theatrical mugging on the stage.

-- Gail Wein