

Juilliard Quartet Names New Violinist



Nicholas Eanet will join the Juilliard String Quartet. He broke his wrist while skating.

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The venerable Juilliard String Quartet, a pillar of 20th-century chamber music, has chosen a new first violinist: Nicholas Eanet, one of the Metropolitan Opera's two concertmasters, will join the quartet at the end of the season.

But the announcement is clouded by news that would send shivers down the spine of any string player. A recent accident while on in-line skates left Mr. Eanet, 36, with a broken wrist.

Mr. Eanet said the prognosis was for a 100 percent recovery. "I'm not worried at all," he said Thursday in a joint interview with the other quartet members. A jacket was draped over his cast-enclosed arm.

He said he had the accident on Oct. 9 while in a euphoric state after telling his good news to Robert Mann, one of his former teachers at the Juilliard School and the quartet's first violinist from its founding in 1946 to 1997. Mr. Eanet said he was zooming downhill on the Central Park Drive and dived onto the grass while trying to avoid running into a friend skating with him.

The break was to his left wrist, above the hand that fingers the notes. He said that there was damage to muscles but not to tendons or nerves, and that he expected to be back at the Met by Christmas.

The other members said they understood Mr. Eanet's desire to celebrate with a romp. Mr. Eanet said he had been using in-line skates for 20 years.

Mr. Eanet replaces Joel Smirnoff, who joined the quartet as second violinist in 1986 and took over the first chair on Mr. Mann's departure in 1997. Mr. Smirnoff has been named president of the Cleveland Institute of Music. The other members of the quartet are Ronald Copes, the second violinist since 1997; Samuel Rhodes, the violist since 1969; and Joel Krosnick, the cellist since 1974.

Mr. Eanet's appointment comes at a watershed time in the string quartet world. An unusually large number of well-known ensembles have recently disbanded or are about to, including the Vermeer, Guarneri, Berg and Mendelssohn quartets. The members of the Juilliard Quartet said the thought of disbanding had never crossed their minds when Mr. Smirnoff announced his departure last season.

"This is a major reinvention," Mr. Krosnick said.

For Mr. Eanet, who grew up in Park Slope, Brooklyn, the new job is something of a return. He spent six years as first violinist of the Mendelssohn String Quartet, right after finishing his studies at Juilliard, but quit because the travel had become a burden. "I've come to peace with that," he said, referring to the frequent travel. He has spent the last 10 years at the Met and will earn a bit less, but he said the invitation to join the Juilliard was irresistible.

"To me this quartet is one of the great chamber music groups of the 20th century," he said.

The quartet's members described a quick courtship in choosing the newest member of what can at times seem like a conjugal state. They put together a list of candidates last spring, singled out the top three choices and spent two days rehearsing and talking with each one.

Mr. Eanet was an obvious candidate, the members said. Mr. Krosnick and Mr. Rhodes had played with him before, in collaborations with the Mendelssohn quartet. Mr. Rhodes said he had often attended the Met and detected an improvement in the string sound of the orchestra that he attributed to Mr. Eanet.

During the trial, the candidates and the three quartet members worked on music by Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Ravel and Bartok. The Schubert piece — the "Rosamunde" Quartet (D. 804) — was at Mr. Eanet's suggestion. It is a favorite of his, and with Schubert's operas rarely performed, Mr. Eanet said he had little opportunity to play his music.

The members said they were especially looking for a violinist with a passion for quartet playing. “You’ve got to be just a little nuts and drunk with love for doing this,” Mr. Krosnick said.

Mr. Copes said the group was not trying to find a musician who would just fit in, “but someone who would create a slightly different voice that we would react to, and who then would react to that.” He likened the relationship to an electronic feedback loop.

Mr. Eanet spent the two-day trial at Mr. Krosnick’s house in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., where the members could see how he rehearsed and how he approached matters like tempo and color. Conversation spilled over into lunch, where the four men talked about Mr. Eanet’s philosophy of performance and views of composers.

Mr. Rhodes said that from the first bars of the very first piece — the Schubert — Mr. Eanet’s compatibility shone through. At the opening of the “Rosamunde” Quartet, a few measures after the lower voices play an accompanying figure, the first violinist enters with a soft melody. “We heard something that I’ve always imagined to be the essence of that passage,” Mr. Rhodes said, “quiet and distant yet expressive.”

Mr. Eanet said he had not had many chances to play chamber music while handling the demanding job at the Met. Asked to describe the difference between his present and future roles, he said that at the Met he had to pace himself during long opera scores that have stretches of routine accompanying material.

“You need to be a little more disengaged and see the larger picture,” he said, instead of giving “150 percent” for an entire quartet performance. He also said that he sometimes had to impose his personality on the orchestra when the conductor was weak.

Half-joking, he said he would have to work on playing chords or double stops; in orchestra string sections, the multiple notes are divided among different players. “But my pizzicati are in great shape,” he said, referring to the plucked notes common in Italian opera scores.

Mr. Eanet’s debut with the Juilliard is planned for July 8 at the Ravinia Festival near Chicago. The “Rosamunde” Quartet will be on the program.

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