

HEINZ HOLLIGER

Oboist

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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MUSIC REVIEW | HEINZ HOLLIGER

An Oboist Who Stands Out Even as He Is Blending In

By ALLAN KOZINN

Heinz Holliger had a point on Thursday evening when he described the Mozart Oboe Quartet (K. 370) as a "pocket concerto." Mr. Holliger had just performed it with members of the Juilliard String Quartet at the Metropolitan Museum, and he had not only endowed the oboe line with a distinct personality but also used it to lead the ensemble in a performance that danced its way through Mozart's lively, technically challenging figuration.

That said, Mr. Holliger could hardly be accused of abandoning the ideal of chamber music equality. With its naturally pinched, reedy sound, the oboe inevitably calls attention to itself amid a homogenous group like a string trio. But Mr. Holliger was also fully engaged with the string lines, and in the fast movements especially, there was a vivid give and take. The Juilliard players contributed fully to this as well: in the opening movement, for example, Joel Smirnoff answered Mr. Holliger's statement of the main theme by repeating it with a sharply focused violin tone that seemed almost to mimic the oboe's sound.

Mr. Holliger also performed with three Juilliard players in Elliott Carter's Quartet for Oboe and Strings (2001), this time with Ronald Copes taking the violin line, joining Samuel Rhodes, the violist, and Joel Krosnick, the cellist. Mr. Holliger had commissioned the work as a companion piece for the Mozart, and given their historical distance, one wouldn't expect the two works to intersect. Yet the Carter drew on a similar kind of energy, largely because Mr. Carter painted each instrument's line as if it were a character in an unspecified drama. He also made a point of writing both for the full ensemble and for every possible duet and trio combination.

This kind of instrumental dramatization seems to be a current interest of Mr. Carter's. His String Quartet No. 5, inspired by listening to quartet rehearsals, operates similarly, with passages suggesting the discussions, disputes and resolutions that occur when an ensemble works through a piece of music.

In Mr. Carter's Oboe Quartet, the oboe portrays a picaresque protagonist, daring and playful. Mr. Holliger excels in music that requires him to create those qualities; they animate parts of the Mozart as well. The string writing was mellower, but as in the Mozart, the oboe and string lines were intertwined and seemed to react to each other.

The two works Mr. Holliger performed were framed by full quartet readings of Schubert's Quartettsatz in C minor and Beethoven's introspective and intense Quartet in F (Op. 135). In both scores, the Juilliard's phrasing seemed carefully considered, and its sound had the necessary warmth and flexibility.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

Tel: 212.757.0782 • Fax: 212.541.5179

E: nycolbert@colbertartists.com

Web: <http://www.colbertartists.com>