

HEINZ HOLLIGER

Oboist

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTER



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Oboist makes a profound impression

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Music Critic

Traditionally, oboes are about contained, benign beauty, and it's at that starting point you realize how much Heinz Holliger has changed that whole sound world. Philadelphia isn't starved for great oboists, thanks to the Philadelphia Orchestra's Richard Woodhams, but the eccentric, bookish Holliger expands the instrument's range in ways that left some listeners breathless during his concert Wednesday with the Juilliard String Quartet at the Kimmel Center.

Most immediately noticeable was his ample tone quality in Mozart's *Oboe Quartet*. But the vivid meaning and dramatic inflections he brought to phrases that are often merely ingratiating could perhaps come only from someone who moonlights as a composer. That fact, too, informed the concert's primary event, Elliott Carter's 1991 *Oboe Quartet*. Though Carter is America's greatest living composer, his uncompromising atonality inspires as much fear as admiration. The also uncompromising Holliger has, in his composing life, produced a psychologically harrowing opera version of the Snow White story. No

wonder that Carter's quartet, in his hands, sounds like the most natural thing in the world.

In pre-performance comments, Holliger described Carter's *Oboe Quartet* as a series of conversationlike duets. That's a good lifeline for listeners, but the music outdistances any such description. Characteristically, Carter embraces the chaos of the modern world with eventful theatricality. You sense the oboe trying to get its arms around it all with wide, ranging melodies usually associated with Bach fugues. When that fails, the oboe calls the other instruments to order with long blasts of sound infused with hearty wit. Holliger's execution was, appropriately, as arresting as a car alarm.

The Juilliard quartet is an ideal collaborator. The group doesn't have the technical infallibility of the Arditti Quartet, but its longtime relationship with Carter's music was apparent in a larger, conceptual understanding that gave the performance cohesion.

Though Carter's train of thought is as clear, in its way, as Mozart's, any through-line of musical organization is elusive; while not heard, that element was felt. Also, Carter's confrontational music allowed new appreciation of the inner tensions in Dvorak's oft-heard *String Quartet No. 12 (Op. 96; "American")*. The performance lacked the surface luster one hears from less-brainy ensembles, but so what?

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