

HEINZ HOLLIGER

Oboist

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

San Francisco Chronicle

Colleague absent, oboist carries quartet

- Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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This is what they mean by the unpredictability of the performing arts.

No sooner had the members of the Juilliard String Quartet arrived in San Francisco on Monday night for their Herbst Theatre recital than second violinist Ronald Copes was hospitalized with a kidney stone. And although he's expected to recover shortly, that left the presenter, San Francisco Performances, with only a fraction of the promised ensemble.

Ruth A. Felt, the organization's president, told the audience Tuesday night that she would have simply canceled the event and rebooked it if not for the presence of oboist Heinz Holliger, an all-too-rare visitor to the Bay Area. So instead, the performers went on with a truncated program that proved as delightful as it was brief, and Felt said the Juilliard would return later in the season.

The one holdover from the planned program was the Mozart Oboe Quartet, in which Copes was not scheduled to participate anyway. His colleagues -- violinist Joel Smirnoff, violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick -- forged ahead, joining Holliger in a strong, zesty reading.

This was a performance that staked its identity on the difference in timbre between the oboe and strings. The two outer movements, for all their grace and suavity, were mostly carried by the tension between the two sound worlds -- a tension made all the more pronounced by Holliger's tangy, insistent sonority. Yet the slow movement, with its moody shift to minor, sounded even more urgent and lovely.

Holliger carried the rest of the show alone, beginning with Britten's "Six Metamorphoses After Ovid" and continuing with Elliott Carter's "Inner Song." The Britten, a suite of wonderfully pictorial vignettes depicting mythological transformations, got a sharply vivacious rendition, with Holliger offering a winning spoken introduction to each piece.

Carter was to have figured in the program in any case -- his Oboe Quartet, written in 2001 as a companion piece for the Mozart, had been planned. "Inner Song," a seven-minute soliloquy that uses wide melodic leaps and extremes of register to impart a sense of urgency, seemed an apt replacement. It was easier to be charmed by Holliger's breathless spoken paean to the beauties of Carter's writing than to concur with it.

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