

# JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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## HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Juilliard String Quartet climbs a summit of chamber music

By CHARLES WARD January 31, 2007

A couple of decades ago, Houston chamber music programs usually got only as modern as a string quartet by Béla Bartók. Then, his set of six quartets, completed in 1939, were viewed as the dangerous edge of 20th-century chamber music. Arnold Schoenberg wrote a group of quartets contemporaneous with Bartók's but his remained out in left field for most listeners. Dmitri Shostakovich had died only in 1975 and his 15 quartets had yet to gain a reputation - or the proponents - to challenge the Hungarian's domination. Bartók (1881-1945) was the anointed representative of musical modernity.

But circumstances have changed enough for Da Camera to dare to program the six Bartók quartets in two nights. Tastes and appetites have matured greatly in Houston. And as Shostakovich's quartets have come to the forefront, Bartók is no longer the routine gesture offered every season.

So, near capacity crowds filled the Menil Collection's lobby Monday and Tuesday for the chance to hear the Juilliard String Quartet perform the complete Bartók cycle. Demand was sufficient to require extra seats along the walls facing the sides of the stage.

Most everyone stayed all the way through the odd-numbered quartets on Monday. A fair number left at intermission of Tuesday's program of the even-numbered works.

But, then, with the hard chairs at the Menil, the only parallel to such demanding evenings of intense listening I have experienced is sitting through the four nights of Wagner's Ring cycle on the spare, wood chairs at the Bayreuth Festival. The Juilliard String Quartet brought authenticity and history to the cycle, which completed Da Camera's five-day celebration of the ensemble's 60th anniversary.

When only two years old, the Juilliard presented the first complete cycle in the United States in 1948. Though personnel has changed, the group's institutional memory of the works and musical style made the Houston survey emotionally intense and intellectually provocative.

Stylistically, the cycle began with the dense, post-Romantic chromaticism opening Quartet No. 1 (1908-09). Bartók had obviously inhaled the testing of harmonic boundaries by Schoenberg and others (before they went over the edge into atonality).

At the other end stylistically, in the famous Fifth Quartet (1934), listeners heard music closest to the deft, listener-friendly mix of tonal harmonies, fierce rhythms, pungent dissonances and "night music" encountered in the Concerto for Orchestra and other popular, late works. In all the quartets Bartók blended dissonance, consonance, motivic development and, especially, ideas influenced by eastern European folk music into a sure style that remains remarkably individualistic.

Hearing the complete works brought to the forefront a kaleidoscope of details.

There was Bartók's technique of basing movements on the statement and development of short motifs. Often only a few notes long, they could be lengthened, shortened and turned upside down. He sometimes extracted the rhythm of the basic motif and applied it in another situation.

Any interval was usable in those motifs, including ones largely forbidden in previous centuries. The tritone - once called "the devil in music" because it's so harmonically ambivalent - showed up in several movements as a key idea. Elsewhere, two intervals that normally seem consonant took on dissonant life simply by the way they were juxtaposed.

The freedoms of 20th-century music appeared in other areas. The overall form of each quartet seldom matched tradition and the structure of individual movements could vary widely. The use of instruments widened. Pizzicato - the plucking of the string - was expanded to even the hard snap of string onto wood that produces a slapping sound. Being up close allowed listeners to see, in the fourth movement of Quartet No. 4, how the Juilliard musicians changed the shape of hand and the configuration of fingers to get different types of plucked sound.

As these and many other facets of style and structure passed by, different for each person, the Juilliard still maintained the listeners' focus of the broad emotional sweep and musical individuality of every section. And, in one of those happenstances of classical music, Bartók's final movement was a moving valedictory to the set, even though he composed it six years before he died. The poignant last thoughts, so beautifully expressed by the Juilliard, were a perfect cap to the group's impressive effort.

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