

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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MUSIC REVIEW

Quintet of Calming Strings and a Rumbling Clarinet

The composer Elliott Carter, far right, discussed his new "Clarinet Quintet" with Ara Guzelimian, the dean of the Juilliard School, on Tuesday after the Juilliard String Quartet and the clarinetist Charles Neidich performed the piece.

By STEVE SMITH Published May 01, 2008

Too much time and ink have been spent talking about how challenging, rigorous and difficult [Elliott Carter's](#) music is,

and not nearly enough on how lively, vigorous and even funny it can be. The playful qualities outnumbered potential hazards on Tuesday night in the Peter Jay Sharp Theater at the [Juilliard School](#), when the Juilliard String Quartet and the clarinetist Charles Neidich offered the premiere of Mr. Carter's "Clarinet Quintet."

The new work, commissioned by the Juilliard School for these players and completed in September, includes three movements marked Scherzando, Scherzo and Finale in a continuous 15-minute span. It touches on even more moods, including a passage of glacial calm in which the strings sustain notes in their highest registers while the clarinet rumbles serenely far below.

No question Mr. Carter's intricate rhythms and bristling textures can be hard to follow, even with a score. Clusters of notes and rests are grouped irregularly, so that the basic pulse feels elusive. In earlier works Mr. Carter, 99, may have set all five players in motion along independent lines, but here the strings usually act in concord, offering unified rejoinders to jaunty clarinet lines, or busily scrabbling while the clarinet holds single notes for surprisingly long durations.

The Juilliard members and Mr. Neidich, all vastly experienced hands in Mr. Carter's music, were faithful to the score's exacting indications and played with character to spare. Afterward each musician performed one of Mr. Carter's recent solo compositions, among his most approachable mature works for their direct utterance and intense expressiveness.

Set aside thoughts of technical schemata. The violinist Joel Smirnoff, who has just been appointed president of the Cleveland Institute of Music and will leave the quartet at the end of next season, treated "Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi" like a poetic soliloquy. His fellow players followed suit.

After intermission Ara Guzelimian, Juilliard's dean, interviewed Mr. Carter onstage. His answers to questions about the quintet were clear, detailed and frequently witty. When his responses overlapped a demonstration by the musicians, it was like a bonus commentary track on a DVD — something producers of new-music recordings might want to consider.

The musicians concluded with another complete performance of the quintet, which sounded even more secure and lively the second time around.



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