

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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Far-reaching display by Juilliard Quartet

REVIEW | Carter's Second Quartet proves right choice

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For more than 60 years, the Juilliard String Quartet has prided itself on setting the gold standard for chamber music ensembles and being unafraid to play challenging music by contemporary American composers.

Both of these strands were prominently displayed Monday night at Ravinia's Martin Theatre where the Juilliard offered unrivaled middle period Beethoven, poignant Haydn, sumptuous Verdi and an authoritative presentation of the Second Quartet of Elliott Carter, who turned 99½ last week.

Regular visitors to the Chicago area and longtime local favorites, the Juilliard attracted a full house Monday night. This appearance took on additional resonance as first violin Joel Smirnoff, a University of Chicago alum, recently announced that he will leave the group at the end of next season to become president of the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Carter wrote his second quartet in 1959 when his mature work and style were coming into their own. It encapsulates a key structural idea of the composer's: Rather than having the four voices of a quartet create a harmonic whole, the individual players should come together -- or differ -- in the same way that actors in a play do, each with his own character and voice. After a delightful introduction by violist Samuel Rhodes, now in his 39th year with the group, the foursome took on their parts with the requisite clarity and commitment.

Juilliard programming is never hodgepodge; while the Carter might not be to everyone's liking (and it's not one of my favorite works by this highly admirable artist), playing it before the Third Beethoven "Razumovsky" Quartet, Op. 59, No. 3 in C Major, guided the audience's ears in the direction of the individually delineated lines in this deeply moving work. This invented Russian theme and cellist Joel Krosnick's leading voice in the second movement were especially inspired.

The evening opened with Verdi's sole entry into the chamber catalog, his E Minor Quartet of 1873, written just after "Aida" and before the flowering of his last years. It's a sort of operatic-style chestnut, but one this group loves. The "Fantasia" movement from one of Haydn's valedictories, the Op. 76, No. 6, was the encore. It sounded like a salute to Smirnoff's 22 years with the Juilliard, 11 of them as Robert Mann's most worthy successor in the first violin's chair.

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