

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

Tanglewood

Bartok's struggles with destiny

By Andrew L. Pincus, *Special to The Eagle*

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LENOX — In Bartok as in Beethoven, you can hear a musical autobiography written out in the string quartets.

The comparison is timely because the Emerson String Quartet played two of Beethoven's 16 quartets at Tanglewood on Sunday, and the Juilliard String Quartet followed with three of Bartok's six on Thursday night.

Each program showed the composer not only forging new directions for the genre but also creating great human testaments.

The Emerson performed two of Beethoven's late quartets, Opus 130 and 132, which showed the deaf composing grappling with the personal and the divine. The Juilliard played Bartok's even-numbered works, providing a snapshot of his development, but also showing a 20th-century struggle with destiny akin to Beethoven's in the previous century.

The Juilliard concert was one of those occasions when music seems to transcend the limits of sound and expand horizons. Like the Emerson with its recently completed Beethoven cycle in New York, the Juilliard had just come off a series of Bartok cycles in celebration of its 60th anniversary. The program also commemorated the first Bartok quartet cycle in the United States, played by the Juilliard at Tanglewood in two concerts in 1948.

Bartok is apparently still a hard sell. Seiji Ozawa Hall was not full for the concert, and at intermission about a quarter of the audience, including some students, headed for the gates. With no lawn audience on the rainy evening, the hall's big back door was closed, reinforcing the ensemble's tightly knit sound.

Nobody performs these works better than the Juilliard. The Emerson also performs them superbly, but its sound is more elegant, taking off some of the rough edges. The Juilliard made no attempt to beautify the dissonances, jagged rhythms and deliberate uglinesses. The beauty emanated from the core of the music.

The second quartet, composed between 1915 and 1917, is rooted in late romanticism despite modernist gestures such as a wild dance in the second movement (of three) and eerie moans and cries in the finale. It is kin in spirit, if not mood, to Schoenberg's nearly contemporaneous "Transfigured Night."

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com

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The 1928 fourth quartet shows Bartok moving into a five-movement mirror form. The first and last movements, and the second and fourth, answer one another, and frame a slow movement buzzing and whispering with the mysteries of night.

The sixth quartet, composed in 1939, is in four movements marked "mesto" ("sad"). This sadness is no romantic yearning. It stems from the death of Bartok's mother in that year and his subsequent flight from his native Hungary to the United States as the Nazi hordes overran Europe.

Significantly, after the Nazi menace became clear, Bartok, a pianist, refused to perform in Germany or allow his music to be broadcast in Germany or Italy.

The tragedy in this late work is like Shostakovich's in his death-haunted last quartet, or Mahler's in his Ninth Symphony. Even a frenzied "burlesque" movement offers little relief. There is no comedy here. The music eventually fades away into nothingness.

Violist Samuel Rhodes' lamenting solo at opening of the sixth somehow summed up the rewards of the evening. It wasn't that he played better than his colleagues - violinists Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes and cellist Joel Krosnick - but coming immediately after intermission, the solo delivered a naked shock that could stand for the corporate excellence evident throughout the evening.

Bartok's music draws on the folk melodies and rhythms of Hungary, but it transforms them into a universal drama. After championing the six quartets for 59 years, the Juilliard is a master of them. There was no standing ovation or encore. This audience knew: None was needed.

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