

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

THE NAPA VALLEY REGISTER

Flawless Juilliard String Quartet launches 28th chamber music season

By L. PIERCE CARSON

Saturday, October 20, 2007

Founded more than six decades ago at the Juilliard School in New York, the world-renowned Juilliard String Quartet came to the wine country this week to launch the 28th season of Chamber Music in Napa Valley. For the ensemble's fifth appearance as part of the acclaimed chamber music effort here, the award-winning musicians selected a program that included works from 18th, 19th and 20th centuries— namely Haydn, father of the string quartet, Beethoven and Shostakovich. Currently quartet-in-residence both at the Juilliard School and the Library of Congress, the Juilliard's current complement — Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes on violin, Samuel Rhodes on viola and Joel Krosnick on cello have been performing as an ensemble for the past decade — has tempered the group's earlier aggressive, no-holds-barred style of playing. Yet let's make it clear that they've not become a group of Caspar Milquetoasts either. Smirnoff, a Juilliard member since 1986 and first violinist since 1997, set the example with upfront, assertive energy. He sustained it throughout the performance — with periodic stomps of his right foot for emphasis — and got the other players to go along enthusiastically.

The most assertive playing, rightfully, was reserved for Shostakovich's "String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Minor," dedicated when completed in 1970 to Vadim Borisovsky, founding violist of the Beethoven String Quartet, which had introduced the majority of the composer's quartets. Dmitri Shostakovich is without a doubt one of the key composers of the 20th century. His symphonies and string quartets are mainstays of the repertoire. But Shostakovich is also a figure whose story raises challenging and exciting issues that go far beyond music. They touch on questions of conscience, of the moral role of the artist, of the plight of humanity in the face of world war and mass oppression. Shostakovich's ambivalence is tied to the fact that he knew Stalin personally and was singled out for criticism by him. After the condemnation of his music by Stalin in 1936, Shostakovich never left home without soap and a toothbrush, so convinced was he that he would be arrested. Shostakovich was not just the single most important composer of string quartets and symphonies from the 1920s to the 1970s, he was a witness to the rise and failure of Soviet Communism, perhaps the defining event of the 20th century. Still in command of his composing powers, Shostakovich was not in good health during his final years. The specter of death

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seemed to occupy his thinking, and thereby, creep into his music. The viola, with its dark and melancholy richness of tone, would become the protagonist in his very last work, the Viola Sonata, written in 1975. It played a similar role in the 13th string quartet, composed five years earlier. The penetrating, contemplative work did present the composer at his soul-searching best. The viola starts the piece with a twelve-note theme, and it concludes with a long viola solo in the upper register. In between there are strident chords and sustained intensity plus — unusual for the period in the composers' homeland — percussive interjections with the bow striking the belly of the instruments. One came away from the Juilliard's performance feeling close to the anguish of this music. In addition to spot-on intonation and unanimity of ensemble, the players brought a special intensity to the piece. Like the old Beethoven Quartet, the Juilliard goes well beneath the surface, delivering a reading that is both illuminating and powerful.

Beethoven's Razumovsky quartets are unrivaled for sheer beauty and richness of conception and sound. Commissioned by a Russian count, two of the three quartets from his Opus 59 actually contain a Russian theme. In the Opus 59, No. 1, this theme is the principal musical thread of the final movement. The first of the quartets of the composer's so-called "middle period," this composition is ideal for anyone who cares to find out what all the rhapsodizing over Beethoven's quartets is all about. The Juilliard Quartet gave a silky, elegant performance of the first Razumovsky quartet, especially in the opening where the cello solo gratifyingly reaches into the deep dark colors of this wonderful string instrument and resonates. Overall, this was incisive playing — the tone flawless, the music infused with feeling, the phrasing superb, the ensemble perfect. To open the program, the visitors selected a seldom-heard Haydn composition belonging to a group of six quartets known collectively as the Erdody Quartets, after a count who commissioned the works. Not the most popular of the half-dozen compositions, nor with a distinct nickname (like Quinten, Emperor or Sunrise), Quartet No. 65 is a nevertheless a meaty work, complete with the composer's humor and rhythmic tricks clearly evident. The Juilliard players offered great purity of style as well as immaculate intonation and technique, hitting on the right degree of expressiveness. It was Haydn at its best, even for the purists.

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