

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

Classical: Juilliard give Bartok quartets first-rate performance

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By **SCOTT CANTRELL** / **The Dallas Morning News**

Great art, to stretch an Ezra Pound bon mot, is news that stays news. Sixty-seven years after Béla Bartók polished off his last string quartet, the set of six remains as astonishing as a tabloid's front page – more sophisticated, of course, but no less amazing.

The Juilliard String Quartet gave the first American performances of Bartók's complete cycle in 1948. The current Juilliard, with a complete personnel turnover in intervening years, is dividing the Bartóks between two concerts presented by the Dallas Chamber Music Society. Sunday evening's program, at Caruth Auditorium, comprised Quartets 1, 3 and 5; the even numbers will be played tonight.

Hearing the Hungarian composer's quartets as a cycle does set their evolution in high relief. With its oddly out-of-body contrapuntal weavings, the opening of the First Quartet (1908) takes up where slow movements of Beethoven's late quartets leave off.

The Third Quartet (1927) opens in a very different world of contentious dissonances and instruments chattering different things all at once. Strings get slapped as well as bowed and plucked. At-the-bridge bowings yield scrawny sounds, and fingers sliding on fingerboards lend glissandos. We feel like observers as some new life form, all tentacles and teeth and scurrying legs, emerges.

The Fifth Quartet (1934) seems less about barbaric yawps and more about structures, great and small. Four of the five movements are symmetrically paired around the central "Bulgarian" scherzo. Instruments play in twos; little two-note motifs are explored; the first violin sings dreamily over surprisingly padded drones; a childish tune peeks out of the finale.

To listen to Sunday's performances was to marvel at how the Juilliard approach has changed. For decades, the group defined a distinctively American string quartet style, rough 'n' ready, unafraid to sacrifice precision to gut excitement. One could argue that it was a baleful influence on much subsequent chamber-music playing.

But on Sunday the present Juilliard – violinists Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes, violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick – played with taut ensemble yet expressive fluidity, the tone fine-grained and much of the time frankly beautiful. These were first-rate performances of these still challenging pieces.

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