

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

MUSIC REVIEW | JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

A Premiere, a Fire Alarm and a Second Chance

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Charles Neidich, right, with the Juilliard String Quartet.

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Shortly before his death in 2002, Ralph Shapey completed “2 for 5,” a clarinet quintet for the Juilliard String Quartet and Charles Neidich. Mr. Neidich and the Juilliard players gave the work its premiere on Monday evening at the [Juilliard School](#), but as they were finishing the first of its two movements, a fire alarm rang, and the Peter Jay Sharp Theater was cleared.

Joseph W. Polisi, the school’s president, said he thought the alarm had been set off by a water pressure problem; in any case, the audience was back five minutes later.

Shapey, famously cantankerous, would probably have been irritated by the interruption, but he might have been amused as well: the first half of the piece was played twice, after all, and for a new work second hearings are crucial.

This piece turned out to be more immediately inviting than many Shapey scores. A clarinet trill, heard at the start, becomes a signpost throughout the first movement and returns near the end of the second. The clarinet holds the spotlight much of the time, the roughly egalitarian implications of Shapey’s subtitle, *Concerto Grosso*, notwithstanding.

The Shapey shared the first half of the program with [Mozart](#)’s *Adagio and Fugue in C minor* (K. 546) and [Elliott Carter](#)’s *String Quartet No. 2* (1959). The Mozart sounded strangely large and heavy, as if Leopold Stokowski had touched up the string parts.

But the Carter, like the Shapey, was the picture of fleetness and energy. Mr. Carter explores the quartet’s palette with a striking efficiency: Each of the four lines is built on its own set of intervals and speaks in a distinct accent, and as the work unfolds, competing solo lines, all speaking at once, melt into dialogues and integrated ensembles, then go their separate ways in the finale. Transparent textures and assertive gestures are essential here, and that was what the Juilliard players provided.

After the intermission Mr. Neidich rejoined the ensemble for the Brahms Clarinet Quintet (Op. 115), playing a replica of a clarinet used by Richard Mühlfeld, for whom Brahms wrote the work. Compared with the smoothly homogenous tone of a modern instrument, Mr. Neidich’s reconstruction sounded brighter and more richly textured.

But novel as the timbre was, the performance’s real selling points were Mr. Neidich’s meltingly beautiful phrasing, the enveloping warmth of the quartet’s tone and the unflinching precision of the collaboration.

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