

# JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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Music Review | Juilliard String Quartet

### Having Old Friends in for an Anniversary Celebration

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#) Published: November 10, 2006

How long has the Juilliard String Quartet been playing together? It's a trick question. As the most venerable of American chamber music institutions, it is celebrating its 60th anniversary this season. But the current lineup has worked together since 1997, when Ronald Copes joined upon the retirement of the last of the quartet's founders, the violinist Robert Mann.

Still, there is ample tradition here: Samuel Rhodes, the violist, has played with the quartet since 1969; the cellist, Joel Krosnick, joined in 1974; and Joel Smirnoff, who moved from second to first violin when Mr. Mann left, joined in 1986.

Part of the group's anniversary celebration is a Bartok cycle, which began with the odd-numbered quartets on Wednesday evening at Alice Tully Hall, and concludes with the even-numbered ones tonight. Bartok cycles are commonplace now: young quartets have taken to playing all six at a sitting. But the Juilliard has a history with these works. It was the first American quartet to play the full set, in 1948, and its recordings retain a classic stature.

Naturally, the quartet's approach to this music has changed over time, and its evolving roster is only one reason. Listeners' changing perceptions shape performances as well: If these quartets once seemed fearsome for their dissonance and brash energy, they are now an accepted part of the musical landscape, and if the job of an ensemble in the 1940s was to make them comprehensible to audiences, now the task is more nuanced and complex.

As the Juilliard players showed in their passionate, polished rendering of the Quartet No. 1 and in their supple account of the Andante in Quartet No. 5, exploring the music's subtleties and its disguised Romanticism is one option. But softening the music's edges and mining its warmth can go only so far, and the quartet also honored its countervailing obligation to see that Bartok's urgent, high-pressure scoring is not defanged.

This was the better part of the Juilliard Quartet's playing on Wednesday. For all the throbbing vibrato and focused beauty that Mr. Smirnoff and Mr. Krosnick, in particular, brought to brief, lyrical passages in each work, a necessary aggressiveness was always close at hand. And when the ensemble played at full throttle, as in the closing pages of the Quartet No. 5, it was with the full measure of insistent drive, grittiness and astringency that has always given Bartok's music its visceral appeal.

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