

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

The Louisville Courier-Journal

Monday, November 19, 2007

Juilliard and Carter: Masterful

By Andrew Adler Courier-Journal Critic

Juilliard String Quartet violist Samuel Rhodes, speaking to yesterday's Louisville Chamber Music Society audience, declared composer Elliott Carter "a national treasure." And if there were any doubts among listeners at the University of Louisville School of Music, the Juilliard's performance of Carter's 1959 Quartet No. 2 should have dispelled them in a flash.

Few composers can boast as potent a connection to an ensemble as Carter does to the Juilliard. In April, the group will help give the premiere of his Clarinet Quintet, the latest score to emerge from the extraordinary brain of a man who turns 99 next month. What a life. What a career.

Yesterday the Juilliard -- which besides Rhodes currently comprises violinists Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes, plus cellist Joel Krosnick -- played the Quartet No. 2 with technical mastery and tremendous interpretive commitment. Like virtually all of Carter's works, this one is both to perform and to absorb as an audience, demanding that listeners actually *listen*, and listen hard.

If the music can sometimes resemble a conversation in which participants delight in talking over one another -- whether in whispers or shouts -- there is also a splendidly constructed order to the piece that becomes more apparent the further it progresses. Yesterday's Rhodes map was an ideal means of gaining just enough of an outline for audience members -- and here I include myself -- to appreciate what Carter was going after. The performance itself, full of furious energy, exceptional detail and quite remarkable loveliness, was terrific to behold.

Perhaps even more unusual was the prospect of hearing the Juilliard play Verdi's Quartet in E minor. We don't expect to hear a Verdi string quartet anymore than, say, a Bruckner string quartet. Yet both composers (plus others too numerous to mention) wrote outside their nominal zones of emphasis. In Verdi's case, his Op. 68 string quartet is a rapturous affair that, not too surprisingly, loves to sing.

The Juilliard's reading took awhile to settle into place. Right off, there were a series of intonational miscues that jolted the ear. Happily, the gratification that followed was not too markedly delayed. Verdi's score is not great music. It is, though, worth playing as if it were great, and once they zeroed in, that's just how the Juilliard's members treated it.

Beethoven's Quartet in F Major, Op. 59, No. 1 ("Rasoumovsky") *is* genuinely great stuff. The Juilliard has likely performed this piece dozens of times, yet dug into the notes with no apparent malaise. Yay and double yay.

Colbert Artists Management

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782