

# JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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## Still Packing a Punch

By [Beeri Moalem](#)

Oh, my virgin ears. Was that a portamento in Haydn? Did he just play that open string on purpose in the middle of that phrase? Haydn didn't ever mark *sul ponticello*, did he?

The Juilliard String Quartet, revered relics of a previous generation and a vanishing style, are still kickin' after all these years. Wednesday night at Dinkelspiel Auditorium, presented by Stanford Lively Arts, it played with a rough passion I've only heard on old recordings of the Budapest String Quartet. The quartet is unapologetic about sliding, scratching, and simply laying into its players' fine instruments.

Many of today's younger quartets, especially when playing Haydn or Mozart, worry and fret about producing an immaculate sound. Some fall into the trap of "period performance" as an overarching and finalizing principle. They handle the music of Haydn with oven mitts, afraid to really grip the music, lest they break its fragile shell.

But the Juilliard Quartet comes equipped with boxing gloves instead, unafraid to find out what the music really has to offer. Haydn's Op. 76 offers plenty: theme and variations for a first movement in E-flat, a second movement marked "Fantasia" that goes to B major and beyond, a presto Menuetto with a middle section marked "Alternativo" instead of the usual "Trio," and a typically tricky Haydn finale. All movements featured unabashed and uncompromising attacks by the Juilliard, especially the Menuetto. Joel Smirnoff's ruthless articulation made it feel like a bumpy, sweaty, and sensuous dance, rather than the reserved, stately little steps to which it is usually restricted. It was a most Romantic interpretation of Haydn.

Those boxing gloves came in especially handy for Elliott Carter's second quartet. Second violinist Ronald Copes, especially, could have used some sort of finger protection for a brutal load of pizzicato strikes. Violist Samuel Rhodes explained, with musical examples from the stage, that the piece features a quartet of characters, with individual personalities, duking it out over the course of the drama. If only it were that simple.

### Not Getting Carter

The quartet comes from the 1950s, a time when composers seemed to try their damndest to make their music as incomprehensible as possible. As if lack of a set tonality isn't enough to alienate listeners, simultaneous conflicting tempos and a deliberate avoidance of everything that might be recognizable further complicate matters. The Carter work's strategic position, between Haydn and Verdi, to foil would-be escapees, speaks volumes.

Like the Juilliard Quartet, Carter is a musician of the previous generation. As Carter, at 99, is still alive (the Juilliard Quartet premieres his clarinet quintet in New York later this year), we must still consider him a contemporary composer. Most 21st-century music, however, is a good deal more audience-friendly, while still managing to stay complex and original.

Composers of Carter's ilk, however, still have to be buttressed by the likes of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, or some other dead guy. This isn't to say that there isn't quality music and expression in Carter's pieces; just to say that after 50 years, his music is still extremely difficult to understand and appreciate, even among knowledgeable and curious listeners.

"I don't know whether the Quartet is beautiful or ugly," said Verdi of his one and only chamber work, "but I do know that it's a quartet!" Given the lack of nonvocal works in Verdi's oeuvre, his mastery of instrumental form is surprising. Verdi's own doubts about the beauty of the piece may have arisen from its many awkward moments, where the entire quartet is sent on gnarly, unison, sixteenth-note runs.

The Juilliard took these flourishes in stride, realizing them as transitions between the gems that are Verdi's gift: vocal melodies. Joel Smirnoff did his best soprano impression, while the rest of the quartet accompanied him with the grace and color of a top-notch pit orchestra. In the scherzo movement's trio section, the quartet's other Joel, Mr. Krosnick, delivered a tenor aria worthy of Pavarotti. The cello sound carried a commanding yet loving presence. It is the heart of the piece, and was the highlight of the concert.

The Quartet concludes with a fugue on par with the finale of Beethoven's Op. 59, No. 3. The Juilliard Quartet showed off with spiccato bowing that was virtuosic and dazzling, if not always matching from person to person.

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