

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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At Kennedy Center, Juilliard Shows Why It's First

Among String Quartets

BY CECELIA PORTER, DECEMBER 8, 2008

At a time when such long-revered quartets as the Guarneri, Berg and Mendelssohn are fading from the concert scene, **the Juilliard String Quartet** – now its 63rd season – **continues to reinvent itself, confirming its premier status.**

The resident quartet at the Library of Congress for more than 40 years, **the Juilliard maintains its risk-taking approach, as well as its uncommon intensity, keen absorption and singleness of purpose during each piece.** In an installment of the Kennedy Center's Fortas Chamber Music Concert series, the group took the Terrace Theater stage Friday, drawing a capacity audience that clamored for more than the one encore offered.

Friday's program opened with Mendelssohn's ebullient Quartet in E-flat, Op. 12, moved on to Henri Dutilleux's heady "Ainsi la Nuit" and concluded with Ravel's Quartet in F. The Juilliard showed Mendelssohn at his most luminous and impetuous, giving to the work as a whole an impassioned tenderness, at times veiled in somber shadows – even in the teasing second movement.

The Juilliard, which presented the American premiere of Henri Dutilleux's quartet 30 years ago at the Library of Congress, played it Friday with the group's trademark sense of authority and meticulous virtuosity. As they ventured through the work's seven movements, the players enlisted the composer's dense textures, clustered harmonies, dynamics and coloristic string language in transmitting suggestions of timelessness and infinite space.

With the Ravel came chances for listeners to bask in all its sunlight, voiced in shimmering tremolos. Here the composer reveled in an enrapturing exoticism born of Moorish-tempered modal colors and the strumming of imagined Iberia. Violist Samuel Rhodes' muted solos in the slow movement brought some ravishing moments, supported but never overwhelmed by his colleagues' contributions.

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