

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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MUSIC REVIEW

Unfurling a Musical Thank You

Rachel Papo for The New York Times

From left: Joel Smirnoff, Ronald Copes, pianist Gilbert Kalish, Joel Krosnick, and Samuel Rhodes.

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Among [Ralph Shapey's](#) last pieces were two quintets for the Juilliard String Quartet and specific soloists, the clarinetist Charles Neidich and the pianist Gilbert Kalish. The scores were not commissioned, and the musicians didn't know about them until after Shapey's death in 2002. Shapey composed them as gestures of friendship, in gratitude to players who had championed his music over many years.



Having performed the first quintet, "2 for 5," with Mr. Neidich in October, the string ensemble included the premiere of the Piano Quintet in its concert with Mr. Kalish at the Peter Jay Sharp Theater on Monday. And if it isn't as immediately engaging as "2 for 5," the Piano Quintet is in some ways a more substantial score. Its four movements touch on the qualities you would expect in an early-19th-century work, from humor and introspection to vigor for its own sake.

Shapey's harmonic language is spiky, as always, particularly in the string writing. Yet within the daunting shell the string lines create, the piano music dances and sings. At times it is almost as if two works were being performed simultaneously, with Mr. Kalish giving the music its sparkle, and the Juilliard players keeping it from getting too friendly.

Mr. Kalish also joined the quartet for [Elliott Carter's](#) Quintet for Piano and Strings (1997), a piece that begins in ominous darkness but lightens considerably over its 15-minute span. Mr. Carter's goal here was to avoid letting the piano line lapse into harmonic support, and he accomplished it by keeping a sharp focus on the distinctions between piano and string sound. At times these sounds move in opposite directions: sustained piano chords fade away, while bowed strings grow louder. Elsewhere they strive for similarity but never quite meet, as when a staccato piano line weaves through pizzicato string figures.

On their own, the Juilliard players opened the program with an earthy but occasionally harsh-toned account of Haydn's Quartet in E flat (Op. 76, No. 6) and closed it with [Verdi's](#) String Quartet in E minor (1873), a pleasant enough work without much intellectual candlepower. Mostly, it wishes it were an opera. Song-shaped themes rise from one or the other violin (as sopranos) or the viola (as a tenor), with the cadential clichés of 19th-century quartet writing periodically punctuating the flow. It is as if each movement were a medley of transcribed arias. And before you know it, you've whiled away a half-hour with not much to show for it.

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