

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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Juilliard String Quartet brings musical storm to CIM

by Donald Rosenberg / Plain Dealer Reporter

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Photo: Nana Watanabe

The weather outside was - oh, how does that insistent song go? - frightful. But as seen through the glass panels of Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, the tableau of swirling snow and luminous garden was, hmm, delightful.

And magical, which also would describe the music-making inside. Sitting onstage Monday in front of the wintry landscape was the Juilliard String Quartet, appearing in the institute's Mixon Hall Masters Series. The ensemble, which has been an artistic force of nature for six decades with only a handful of personnel changes, is no stranger to the school. It has appeared there often in performance and coached students in chamber music.

But Monday's concert had a bittersweet note. The first violinist of the Juilliard is Joel Smirnoff, who became president of the institute in July. He's performing with his quartet colleagues through June, when he'll relinquish his seat to devote himself to his Cleveland duties.

In contrast to the frigid climatic conditions Monday, the Juilliard was its typical simmering self. Few string quartets go to such daring interpretive lengths as this ensemble, whose players interact as if they can read one another's minds.

Along the way, they invest every turn of phrase and harmony with edge-of-the-seat intensity.

The sense of daring could be heard on this occasion in Juilliard performances of works by Haydn, Mendelssohn, Ravel and Beethoven that must have changed most listeners' views of these scores. Even when the members of the Juilliard relax, you can feel their muscles tensing and their brains working overtime.

Haydn's Quartet in C major, Op. 20, No. 2, for example, evinced little of the seemingly sunny aspect of its central key. Here we heard Haydn in serious and stern frame of mind, full of expressive power and urgent rhythmic personality.

The Juilliard's cellist, Joel Krosnick, catapulted the opening argument using his dense timbre and thick vibrato to assert the music's fervent intentions. Smirnoff, violinist Ronald Copes and violist Samuel Rhodes seconded the motion, answering and questioning with fierce concentration. It was the very model of a modern-day approach to Haydn.

Mendelssohn was all of 20 when he completed his Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 12, No. 1, and what a burst of youthful passion the work is. The Juilliard treated the material for all its effusive worth, venturing richly through the emotional terrains, scampering "Midsummer Night's Dream"-like in the second movement and acknowledging both the overwrought and serene aspects of the finale.

The Juilliard's audacity reared its head most vibrantly in Ravel's Quartet in F major, which was more interested in mysterious drama, harmonic implication and explosive attack than in the exoticism some ensembles emphasize. The performance was haunting (Rhodes' muted viola as disembodied figure in the slow movement) and explosive (the group's ferocious pizzicatos in the second movement and vehement propulsion in the finale).

For an encore, the ensemble played the first movement of Beethoven's Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 127, which was motivated in such characteristic Juilliard fashion that the audience likely wouldn't have minded sticking around to hear the rest of this monumental score.



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