

# JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

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## HOUSTON CHRONICLE

### Concert review: A welcome return for Juilliard quartet

By CHARLES WARD Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle Oct. 5, 2009

Gala season-opening concerts often celebrate new beginnings in conservative ways. Not so Da Camera's start of its 22nd season. It offered history in the making: the first major concert of the reconstituted Juilliard String Quartet.

Founded in 1946 and legendary as the quintessential American quartet, the Juilliard faced change last year when first violinist Joel Smirnoff left to become president of the Cleveland Institute of Music. The other members never entertained disbanding, as the famed Guarneri and Vermeer quartets have done in recent seasons. Instead the players chose Nick Eanet as only the third first chair in the group's stellar history.

The Juilliard's performance Saturday at the Wortham Theater Center was long coming, though. Soon after the selection, Eanet broke his left wrist in an in-line skating accident in New York's Central Park. Debut concerts in July were canceled to permit Eanet recovery time. The group played one event in September in rural New England.

**At Saturday's concert, Eanet was an assured, engaging leader capable of meltingly lyrical playing** (previously he was a concertmaster with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra). Listeners learned they face an interesting future as they hear the ensemble chart its new personality.

Lyricism has not been a word normally associated with the Juilliard's style. Its hallmark has been ferocious intensity with gruffness of tone accepted in the heat of the performance. The question will be how — and if — the two traits blend.

That original DNA has not gone away, as shown in the muscular opening moments of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44, No. 1. The trait returned more prominently in the evening's concluding work, Schumann's Quartet in E-flat Major for piano and strings, Op. 47, when Da Camera artistic director/pianist Sarah Rothenberg joined the group, minus Eanet. **Throughout the program, including Beethoven's final string quartet, Op. 135, in F Major, elegance, nuance, structural intricacies (in the Beethoven) and a genuine interest in the interior emotional life of the music prevailed over blunderbuss bravado. The three veterans played as if their musical lives are blooming anew.**

(In repertoire, the Juilliard's conservative program was certainly true to form for gala concerts. No need to ruffle ears of patrons waiting to munch canapes at the post-event party.)

For me the Mendelssohn performance was the best (especially compared to the soporific version presented by the Tokyo String Quartet in September to open the season of the Houston Friends of Music). The Juilliard blended spirited energy and beautiful playing to make a fairly lightweight work seem a golden treasure.

The struggle between old and new was most evident in Beethoven's rather hopeful final quartet. The playing was inquisitive and attentive to detail but the interpretation not fully convincing.

For much of the time, the swooning slow movement the exception, Schumann's quartet was an old-fashioned saw-off (in the refined way that chamber musicians conduct such an event). Rothenberg played well, except for a spectacular splat in the final chord, and violinist Ronald Copes, violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick enjoyed every moment.

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