

South Mountain Concerts

Juilliard in form with new member

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PITTSFIELD — There was no publicity, no introduction from the stage, not even a program note, but the Juilliard String Quartet opened its 63rd season at South Mountain Sunday afternoon with a new first violinist, only the third in its long history.

Nick Eanet, formerly a concertmaster of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, replaced Joel Smirnoff, who left last summer to become president of the Cleveland Institute of Music. In a program of Schubert, Bartok and Beethoven, the Juilliard did things the way it always has: with emphasis on the music, not personalities, hype or window dressing.

Not that there wasn't a difference in personalities. From the opening measures of Schubert's Quartet in A minor, it was clear that Eanet plays with a warmer, sweeter tone and more easygoing style than his predecessor, and that his partners would go where he led.

Which is not to say that one style is better than the other. But the Juilliard, which began life as a bunch of barnstorming modernists, seemed reborn in an old-masterly manner. Or, to be more exact, it continued an evolution begun under founding first violinist Robert Mann, who put in 50 years, and continued under Smirnoff, who carried on for 12.

Despite 10 years as one of the Met's two concertmasters, Eanet, 37, has chamber music in his blood. (The name is pronounced at EN-net.)

In his last year at the Juilliard School, from which he graduated in 1994, Mann was his teacher and mentor. Early on, he was a member of the Mendelssohn String Quartet. During the Met years, he continued to play chamber music on the side, leading to the invitation from violinist Ronald Copes, violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick to audition for the quartet's vacancy.

In the announcement of the appointment, Rhodes, the senior member, said, "We knew from working together and our conver-

sations that we had absolutely found the right person to be our new first violinist." An in-line skating accident, which left Eanet with a broken wrist, delayed his debut from last summer till now.

The South Mountain program was marred by some too-audible heavy breathing from one of the players (it wasn't possible to tell who); the problem will need to be addressed soon. Otherwise, it was hard to find anything not to like.

The Schubert performance picked up where the previous Sunday's trio concert left off. The A minor Quartet, whose slow movement reuses a well-known theme from Schubert's "Rosamunde" music, bears the same undercurrent of melancholy as the two Schubert trios.

The Juilliard took a gentle, mellow approach to these sometimes nostalgic moods. Rich in subtleties — Eanet's experience with operatic melody seemed to pay off here — the expansive music flowed at a leisurely pace. Even the stormy passages left room for breath.

With Bartok's Quartet No. 2, the new configuration ventured into old Juilliard territory. It was the original Juilliard, under Mann, that gave the American premiere of the six Bartok quartets (at Tanglewood). The performance of the folk-based second quartet honored the tradition, not with the aggressiveness of the early Juilliard, but with an immersion in the music's mysterious cries and the urgency of its grinding dissonances and questing figures. The keening melody of the slow finale was soaked in tragedy.

The Beethoven was his last quartet, No. 16. Again, moderation prevailed where others strive for energy. But unmistakably, the finale's joking exchanges of "Must it be?" "It must be!" ended on the positive. Beethoven's "yes" was also the players'.

On the postcard-perfect September afternoon, the slow movement from Mendelssohn's Quartet No. 3 provided a calming encore.