

No Angst, No Modernism, No Mozart

By JEREMY EICHLER

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

The Juilliard Quartet's program for its Mostly Mozart recital in Avery Fisher Hall on Sunday was the chamber music equivalent of a summer beach read. No angst, no austere modernism, no need to challenge the ears. One could just sit back and take in the lapping sounds of Haydn, early Beethoven and Dvorak. It was a lazy afternoon of August decadence, without the sand.

Part of the appeal was that the Juilliard approached each work with equal proportions of rigorous ensemble precision, virtuosic solo playing and sheer sonic dynamism. It would be easy for this venerable quartet to rest on its laurels, but these four men, all in their 50's or 60's, played with more energy, commitment and abandon than many musicians are half their age.

The program opened with Haydn's Quartet in G minor (Op. 20, No. 3), a work that typifies the composer's refined mix of courtliness, wit and spirited innovation. Emotions are concealed beneath a veil of decorous classicism. The Juilliard's playing was pristine, with the two inner voices — the second violinist Ronald Copes and the violist Samuel Rhodes — forming a single linchpin around which the intricate quartet machinery whirred.

Beethoven's amicable Quartet in G (Op. 18, No. 2) followed in a reading that was as stylish as it was iconic. Each gesture was carefully controlled without a sense of heavy handedness; phrases were chiseled into soft stone. Dvorak's swashbuckling A major Piano Quintet closed the program, with Jon Kimura Parker joining at the keyboard. The ensemble played grippingly, changing on a dime in the first movement between an easygoing folk-flavored lyricism and a fevered spark-shooting intensity. The cellist Joel Krosnick contributed some eloquent solos, and the first violinist Joel Smirnoff played with a winning sense of bravura.

One audience member could be heard commenting indignantly that there was no Mozart on this Mostly Mozart program. It's true in one sense, and yet part of the fun of the festival is playing a Where's Waldo-type game of seeking the composer among the crowd. You might say he was lurking in the interstices, particularly between Haydn's classicism and Beethoven's nascent subjectivity. Or more simply, you could have found him in his Violin Sonata (K. 377), performed by Mr. Smirnoff at a pre-concert recital.