

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET

THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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Tanglewood

A quartet on a quest

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to the Eagle

LENEX -- Unlike the many musicians these days who feel they have to explain themselves to the audience, the Juilliard String Quartet strode onto the stage at Tanglewood Friday night, sat down and went straight to work.

The playing was uncompromising, too. Opening the chamber music season in Seiji Ozawa Hall, the estimable foursome seemed engaged in a quest to uncover hidden layers of meaning in three staples of the repertoire. If no explanations were given, none were needed. The music spoke for itself.

Performances like these compel admiration, if not exactly affection. Nothing is left unexamined; notes are not bricks in a wall, but jewels individually polished and set into place. The players are like explorers pushing ever deeper into an unknown land.

Some things worked better than others (don't they always?). But the prevailing sense was of a group pushing the limits. Even Dvorak's nostalgia-soaked "American" Quartet, composed during a sojourn in Iowa, had the feeling of an urgent message from the heartland. The finale yielded a joyous sense of release, but by then the evening's intensity had become wearing.

Possibly because the pressure was so intense, each violinist -- Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes -- broke a string during Bartok's Quartet No. 5, requiring two timeouts for repairs and the restarting of two movements. (The evening's humidity may also have had something to do with the mishaps.)

"We're going for the record," joked Smirnoff, the second victim. "The record is three."

All of this was Juilliard country. From the first concert, given at Tanglewood in 1947, intensity has been the ensemble's hallmark. The membership has changed over the years -- violist Samuel Rhodes and cellist Joel Krosnick are the senior members, having come aboard in 1969 and 1974, respectively -- but the raw sound and energy in parts of the Bartok performance recalled the group's pioneering recording of the Bartok set from the late 1940s. Even Juilliard performances in the years since have had a smoother finish.

The style is at a far pole from the richer-sounding, mellower approach of the Emerson Quartet, the Juilliard's only peer among American quartets today (and another annual Tanglewood visitor). That doesn't make one group better than the other. But it does guarantee different approaches to music that benefits from them.

The program began with one of Haydn's greatest quartets, Opus 76, No. 5. The opening measures were deceptively intricate and subdued. What ensued in the first movement was a tempest of sound and emotion, followed by an almost romantic depth of expression in the introspective largo. The finale bristled with near-manic energy.

Bartok's outer movements, which mirror each other, were marked by near-violence in the rhythms and sonorities. In between, the two night-music movements, separated by the lighter-hearted scherzo, offered the relief of hushed rustlings and buzzings, pizzicatos and glissandos. Here, quiet intensity awakened the mysteries of night.

If Dvorak's "American" Quartet reflects the "smiling contentment of a bucolic existence," as a Dvorak biographer quoted in the program notes said, this performance was a bucolic existence filtered through urban lenses. Nostalgia was tempered by discipline.

Taken individually, these performances provided a new look at familiar masterworks. As an evening-long experience, the program felt like a hard ride in a finely tooled machine.

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