

# The New York Times

Sunday, December 24, 2006

## THE YEAR IN MUSIC

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

**L**OOKING back over the year, I tried to compile a list of highs and lows in classical music. But call me irresponsible; I simply found too many exciting and meaningful achievements to dwell on the disappointments. So here are some of the most memorable events:

1. On paper a Britten evening may not have seemed the most daring way for the English tenor Ian Bostridge to begin his Perspectives series at Carnegie Hall. But that program, in Zankel Hall in March, presented this adventurous artist in Britten's mercurial song cycle "Winter Words," on poems by Thomas Hardy, and in the neglected Canticles, five unorthodox works for voices and instruments on texts ranging from Jacobean metaphysical poetry to T. S. Eliot. Mr. Bostridge gave haunting, deeply expressive and keenly intelligent performances.

2. The Shostakovich centennial was celebrated by the Emerson String Quartet at Alice Tully Hall and the Alexander String Quartet at the Baruch Performing Arts Center with competing cycles of the 15 quartets, performed in chronological order. It was a special privilege to hear the dynamic Alexander performances in Baruch College's intimate 176-seat auditorium. Seldom have these anguished, playful, ironic and masterly works seemed so profoundly personal.

3. Two notable new productions of Wagner's daunting "Ring des Nibelungen" came in close succession. In July, the Bayreuth Festival in Germany introduced an engrossingly modern staging by the playwright Tankred Dorst, which presented the gods, dwarfs and mortals as souls forgotten by the world who keep trying to relive their stories. The production was dominated by the organic, intense and insightful conducting of Christian Thielemann. Then, in September, the

Canadian Opera Company in Toronto offered an imaginative production with each opera staged by a different director, conducted vibrantly by Richard Bradshaw. But the big news there was the company's splendid new home, an inviting, sleek and intimate house that seats just 2,000.

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4. Peter Gelb, the new general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, deserves credit for his overdue, energetic and multifaceted public outreach efforts. And bringing Anthony Minghella's visually arresting, highly stylized production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" to New York in September was a bold way for Mr. Gelb to inaugurate his tenure.

5. The dramatic soprano Deborah Voigt had a career milestone at the Lyric Opera of Chicago with her first staged performances of the title role in Strauss's "Salome," beginning in October. After a long period of adjusting to her slimmed-down postsurgical body, Ms. Voigt

looked vibrant and acted with abandon. But what mattered more was that she sounded vocally secure and confident, singing with unforced power, shimmering sound and supple phrasing. Imagine this punishing role actually sung, not shouted.

6. This month at Zankel Hall, the French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard brought his staggering technique, searching intellect and fantastical imagination to a program of 24 études that was itself an artistic creation. It was fascinating to hear musical resonances among varied works by Ligeti, Debussy, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Bartok and Liszt. As a last-minute surprise, Mr. Aimard also played the premiere of an impetuous, finger-twisting piano piece, "Caténares," by Elliott Carter, who was there to take a bow on his 98th birthday.

7. Happily, the year brought new recordings to assuage a loss. In July the incomparable mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson died at 52. Two recordings released this year will enhance her legacy while enriching the repertory with recent works by her husband, Peter Lieberson. A highlight of a Lieberson recording on the Bridge label is a live 2004 version of his quizzical and harmonically spiky "Rilke Songs," with Ms. Hunt Lieberson accompanied by the incisive pianist Peter Serkin. And just this month Nonesuch released a live 2005 recording of Mr. Lieberson's "Neruda Songs," settings of five love sonnets by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. This is music of subdued intensity and aching beauty, sublimely performed by Ms. Hunt Lieberson and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by James Levine.

Sadly, there were other notable deaths as well, including several legendary women of opera: the sopranos Birgit Nilsson, Anna Moffo, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Astrid Varnay, as well as the supremely gifted, if often chaotic, conductor and stage director Sarah Caldwell. Gyorgy Ligeti, a composer who loomed over the last decades of the 20th century, also died. Together, these artists gave us countless highs.

B E S E N  A R T S

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# The New York Times

Wednesday, May 3, 2006

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## String Quartets Reveal the Private Shostakovich

By Anthony Tommasini

Almost by default, the string quartet is the most intimate of musical genres, intended for performance in intimate spaces. The music is laid out in four voices, one instrument per voice, and the string instruments are all of the same sound world. Even when Haydn creates mischief in his string quartets, there is something tender and wistful about the humor. And when Bartok goes to the dark side in his quartets, the pulverized, vehement and dissonant music somehow sounds confessional.

So it's not surprising that Shostakovich, the most inscrutable composer of the 20th century, seems at his most revealing in his 15 string quartets. Some commentators are cautious about seeing these works this way, among them Eric Bromberger, who wrote the excellent program notes for the Alexander String Quartet's survey of the Shostakovich quartets. That five-concert series ended on Monday at the Baruch Performing Arts Center.

It can be no coincidence that Shostakovich wrote 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets. But Mr. Bromberger is correct that it oversimplifies things to see the symphonies as Shostakovich's public statements and the quartets as his private ones. After all, there are inconsolable passages in the symphonies and episodes of genial Neo-Classicism in the quartets.

Yet given the nature of the genre, Shostakovich could not help letting his deepest feelings come out. It goes with the territory. The intimacy of the music came through with enhanced power and poignancy in the Alexander quartet's vibrant, probing, assured and aptly volatile performances, given in an ideal hall for chamber music that seats just 174.

The confessional nature of certain Shostakovich quartets is impossible to ignore. He suppressed the Fourth, in D, and the Fifth, in B flat, written in 1949 and 1952, rightly fearing that the music was too

anguished and dangerously modern at a time when the Soviet Union's cultural police were cracking down on musical expression.

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Publicly Shostakovich was forced to write paeans to the state, like the cantata "The Sun Shines Over Our Motherland." Privately he wrote these quartets, which were not performed until after Stalin's death in 1953. The Fifth teems with astringent harmonies, bouts of anger, obsessive repetitions and a waltz movement so long-winded and convoluted that you don't for a moment trust its graceful pose.

Sometimes the quartets seem revealing despite themselves. The Quartet No. 6, in G, was composed in 1956, during the first month of Shostakovich's marriage to his second wife, a captivating party official. His troubled first marriage to Nina Varzar, a physicist, ended with her death in 1954. The Sixth Quartet is sunny: the music of a middle-aged man in love with a young wife, it would seem. Yet despite its playful character, it is structurally rigorous and elusive. Did Shostakovich subliminally known better? Within three years the marriage had ended in divorce.

The renowned Eighth Quartet, in C minor, was composed in 1960, when Shostakovich went to Dresden. The city was still blighted from the devastating Allied bombing in 1945. He dedicated this powerfully bleak work "to the memory of the victims of fascism and war."

Yet Laurel Fay, in her acclaimed biography of Shostakovich, amasses persuasive evidence that he was overcome at the time

with premonitions of death and perhaps thoughts of suicide. In a letter to a friend, written days after he had finished the work, he called it an "ideologically deficient quartet that nobody needs" and described it as his own memorial. The quotations from other works in this score (the Cello Concerto No. 1 and several symphonies) seem a summing up.

Shostakovich, who was not a string player, did not compose his first quartet until 1938, when he was 32. But by his last decade (he died in 1975, at 68), the genre was at the center of his output. The last five quartets date from those years.

The Alexander String Quartet, based in San Francisco, is celebrating its 25th anniversary. The first violinist, the excellent Zakarias Grafilo, joined in 2002. The other members are Frederick Lifitz, second violinist; Paul Yarbrough, violist; and Sandy Wilson, cellist. They have recorded the works for Foghorn Classics; the first volume was recently released, the second is imminent.

On Monday night the Alexander players showed understandable signs of fatigue after their weeklong Shostakovich marathon. Occasionally their concentration slipped, notably in the tragically elegiac final work. But the chance to experience all 15 quartets played in chronological order with such intensity and engrossing commitment in a perfect chamber music hall was a privilege.

The Emerson String Quartet, whose justly praised recording of the Shostakovich quartets was released six years ago by Deutsche Grammophon, is nearing the midpoint of its five-concert survey of the 15 works at Alice Tully Hall, which, at nearly 1,100 seats, is far too big a space. Still, the Emerson players are immersed in these works, and their series remains a major event of the season.

For my part, having heard seven programs of Shostakovich quartets on seven consecutive days, far from feeling drained, I was transported.

B E S E N  A R T S

# The New York Times

Saturday, April 29, 2006

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### *The Alexander Quartet and the Emerson Quartet Perform Shostakovich*

By Anthony Tommasini

Apparently the coincidence of two overlapping Shostakovich string quartet cycles in New York is just that, a coincidence.

As part of Lincoln Center's celebration of the Shostakovich centennial, the Emerson String Quartet is performing all 15 of his seminal quartets in chronological order in five concerts. The series began on Thursday night at Alice Tully Hall, and the place was packed.

Across town on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, at the Baruch Performing Arts Center at Lexington Avenue and East 25th Street, the Alexander String Quartet presented the first two programs in its five-concert survey of the Shostakovich string quartets, also offered in chronological order.

Though based in San Francisco, the Alexander Quartet has been presenting a short residency each semester at Baruch College for 20 years. When its players realized that their Shostakovich series would coincide with the Emerson's, they adjusted one concert date so as not to conflict.

With all respect to the Emerson String Quartet, I must say that it was particularly exciting to hear the first six of Shostakovich's elusive and remarkable string quartets played in the first two programs of the Alexander's series at Baruch.

The Alexander has the enormous advantage of playing in an ideally intimate hall that seats just 174. This

modern auditorium doubles as a lecture hall, so there are elevated rows of ergonomic seats with ample leg room. But the smallness of the space and its vibrant acoustics are the selling points.

Chamber music, as its name implies, was meant to be performed in chamber rooms. Alice Tully Hall, though specifically built for chamber music, seats nearly 1,100 and feels bigger than that.

Devotees of chamber music have long adjusted to hearing string quartets and such played in Alice Tully Hall. On Thursday night, in the first three works, the Emerson played with its trademark burnished sound, interpretive insight and passion. Still, having just heard this music performed by the Alexander Quartet, I found the difference overwhelming.

At Baruch the vibrations from the low strings seemed to travel through the floor and up your legs. You felt enveloped by the music. At Alice Tully Hall, for all the intensity of the Emerson's playing, the sound seemed to come from a distance. During frenetic passages of Quartet No. 2, the splattered intonation of Eugene Drucker in the first violin part, and the grittiness of the collective sound during some pummeled episodes, which went over the edge to coarseness, suggested that the musicians were trying to pump up the music to make an impact in the large, acoustically dry hall.

Without taking anything away from the superb Emerson musicians, who have

stayed together and worked with integrity for nearly 30 years, the Alexander players held their own. It's a curiosity of the classical music business that one deserving ensemble garners Grammy Awards, worldwide fame and standing ovations at New York's premiere performing arts complex, whereas another deserving ensemble plays before a small, half-filled hall at a college. (A ticket price of \$25, \$15 for students and or those 65 and over, is another inducement; tickets for the Emerson concerts are \$60 each.)

The playing of the Emerson Quartet may have had more shades of character and imaginative flights. Yet I was engrossed by the eerie restraint and, when called for, incisive attack of the Alexander's performances. The first violinist, Zakarias Grafilo, was especially admirable for his focused and penetrating sound.

Still, ranking these estimable ensembles is not the point. Both surveys are distinguished. So far, though, the Alexander Quartet, playing in a perfect hall for chamber music, provided the more visceral experience of Shostakovich's most intriguing and personal works.

*The final two programs in the Alexander Quartet's series are tonight and Monday night at 8; the Emerson Quartet's series continues tomorrow at 5 p.m., May 4 and May 11 at 8 p.m., and May 14 at 5 p.m.*

B E S E N  A R T S

# Lawrence Journal-World

Saturday, September 27, 2008

## Review: Jazz-classical collaboration pleases Lied Center fans

By Chuck Berg

The challenge of melding jazz with classical has had a long and checkered history. Early on, there was George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" (1923) and similar symphonic jazz experiments. Regardless of how appealing, there was just one problem. Such standards of today's orchestral pops repertoire lacked improvisation.

Following World War II, with increasing numbers of serious musicians experienced in both jazz and classical looking to artistically bridge the gap, "third stream" was coined for genuinely new amalgams of improvisation and through-written composition. Here one found the still absorbing third-stream confluences by Ralph Burns, Stan Kenton, J.J. Johnson, Bill Russo and Gunther Schuller.

On Friday night, taking a cue from the Lied Center's seasonal promotion of "jazz and classical music crossroads," an enthusiastic, 1,000-plus audience came to check out the third-stream for itself in Branford Marsalis Trio and the Alexander String Quartet.

The performers had found the perfect vehicle, composer Eddie Sauter's still breathtaking "Focus" (1961), a six-part suite written for tenor saxophone giant Stan Getz, with an enlarged string

ensemble placed around the Beaux Arts String Quartet, plus a harp and jazz drumming great Roy Haynes.

Hailed upon its 1962 release on the Verve label, "Focus" became, quite unexpectedly, a hit recording. The combination of Getz's quintessential lyricism and Sauter's lush yet also harmonically and rhythmically astringent writing captured ears, hearts and imaginations.

Due to the daunting heights of the Getz-Sauter collaboration, "Focus" has lived almost entirely through the seminal Verve recording.

Its resurrection by Marsalis and the Alexander was therefore audacious. On Friday, the standing ovations and cheers signaled that Marsalis and friends had made "Focus" its own.

Marsalis, after stints as leader of Jay Leno's "Tonight Show Band" and with Sting, has become one of our brightest and most committed jazz players. In the six-part "Focus," his tenor saxophone sailed across the registers, fleshing out tenderly wrought out sub-tones and reedy punctuations at the bottom, while in the middle and top registers "singing" with a soaring blues-tinged lyricism that brought sections such as "I Remember When" to vibrantly pulsing and poignant life.

For its part, the exquisite Alexander injected Sauter's spiky yet flowing tapestries with unerring jazz-inflected phrasings and dynamics.

Throughout, and in particular during the turbo-charged "Night Rider" and "I'm Late," violinists Zakarias Grafilo and Frederick Lifnitz, violist Paul Yarbrough and cellist Sandy Wilson sounded as if they had lived with Marsalis's improvised interpretations forever. In fact, this was their first ever performance of "Focus" with Marsalis. Amazing!

Paving the way for "Focus" was a stunning set of excerpts from Maurice Ravel, Terry Riley and Wayne Peters by the Alexander incorporating jazz-nuanced elements also deployed by Sauter. In the second set, Marsalis and all-star band-mates bassist Eric Revis and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, dug deep on two originals, the contemplative "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" and earthy "Bluetain."

It was a stunning night. One hopes that the Marsalis-Alexander version of Sauter's "Focus" will soon be recorded to complement and therefore enlarge our appreciation of Getz's iconic treatment and, indeed, the third-stream itself.

B E S E N  A R T S

# Albuquerque Journal

Monday, September 22, 2008

## Chamber Music Albuquerque

By D.S. Crafts

Opening its sixty-eighth season, Chamber Music Albuquerque demonstrates once again it can bring the very best performers to New Mexico. The Alexander String Quartet, with a string of prestigious recordings to its name, took the stage of the Simms Center for the Performing Arts Sunday afternoon for a program of Mozart, Shostakovich and Riley.

Having recorded the entire Beethoven and Shostakovich Quartets, the group displays a remarkable zeal in interpretation coupled with a hearty opulence of tone in everything it plays.

The concert began with Mozart's so-called "Hunt" Quartet in B-flat major, one of six quartets he dedicated to Haydn. The opening phrase suggested to some of its early listeners the sound of a hunting horn. Given the robust rendition by the Alexanders, one could easily picture galloping horses across the Austrian countryside. The Menuetto had a bounce to it, full of gaiety and joviality just short of carefree. They took the slow Adagio a tad faster than I have heard it before, but never losing any of the detail. Consequently, the final Allegro assai was necessarily brisk with a cumulative energy driving the music to a most satisfying conclusion.

The Quartet No. 2 by Dmitri Shostakovich was written in 1944 in the midst of the Second World War, during which he had already composed two symphonies. Former radio commentator Dan Haik remarked to me, "It's Shostakovich's cheeriest quartet," a comment both quintessentially ironic as well as completely true in comparison to its thirteen siblings.

The Second Quartet is not often played, but the Alexanders make as impressive case for the work as I have yet heard. The signature feature of all four movements is a driving intensity bordering on the manic. It's almost as if the composer is taking out his anger and frustration on the music, and the ensemble held nothing back in that regard. The first movement, Overture: Moderato con moto, opens with a phrase that might easily be mistaken for Bartok with its Hungarian rhythm. The slow second movement might be accurately described as an accompanied cadenza featuring the warm, impassioned playing of first violinist Zakarias Grafilo. The lugubrious waltz begins softly in the cello (Sandy Wilson) with the remainder of the group eventually building to an almost horrific climax before settling back to the bleak spirit of the opening. Violist Paul Yarbrough introduced the unmistakably Russian theme of the final movement before the group put it through four high pitch variations.

Sandwiched between these two pieces was the Mythic Birds Waltz by Terry Riley—"Waltz" being used purely as metaphor. Riley is often referred to as the originator of musical minimalism (a dubious distinction). He has moved on from that style—sort of—but not before the damage was done.

Written for himself and a sitar player, the work vacillates between passages of rhythmic acceleration (the most effective bits) and slower sections. Certainly the piece had the benefit of what was seemingly an exemplary performance.

B E S E N  A R T S



Wednesday, May 3, 2006

## Double tribute breaks new ground

By Herman Trotter

**A**nniversary tributes to composers always are well intended, but often more politically correct than enlightening.

In observing the 250th birthday anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the 100th of Dmitri Shostakovich, the Alexander Quartet came up with a formula and a transcendent performance that really broke some new ground.

The group opened with an adagio movement from the 14-year-old Mozart's Quartet No. 1, K. 80, full of light, but probing lyricism, then presented the first Buffalo performance of Mozart's transcription of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat from Book II of the Well-Tempered Clavier, somber but structurally transparent.

A performance of Mozart's Quartet in C, K. 465, called the "Dissonant" Quartet, completed the Mozart tribute with a performance that balanced seriousness of intent with a lightness of texture, all of which imbued the music with a luminous clarity.

Shostakovich paid tribute to Bach with 24 preludes and fugues for piano, and the Shostakovich tribute opened with No. 15 in D flat minor, full of folk-like lilt and saw-toothed angularity.

Forgive the brevity, but I must confess that the performance of the concluding Shostakovich Quartet No. 3 was so

extraordinary that it deserves special commentary.

The work, written during and after World War II, is full of the angst of war and communist oppression, all of which apply equally to our presently troubled world. The opening theme is deceptively whimsical, even flip. But in the following skewed waltz movement, a dissolute quality permeates the music with eerie, groping spiccato pianissimo figures, while the stabbing attacks of the following movement were executed with superb precision and the unexpected sudden cutoff at the end took many listeners' breath away.

The following adagio was wonderfully biting and introspective, while the concluding movement recapitulated the work's tensions and some of its early innocence before ending in sardonic, ghostly quietude that, again, had the entire audience holding its breath.

The Alexander musicians were so in control of the music's emotional contours and lurches, and so spiritually attuned to Shostakovich's message that they seemed not so much to be playing the music as breathing it.

The Russian writer Ilya Ehrenberg once said: "Music has the great advantage of being able to tell everything without mentioning anything." This was one of those performances.



Wednesday, April 26, 2006

## The Septuagenarian and the Educator

By Fred Kirshnit

The String Quartet No. 2 of Leos Janacek has acquired an extramusical life in recent years. Now a favorite subject for social historians and psychologists, it often appears in programs wherein the management has assumed that an entire evening of music will not be enough to hold an audience's attention.

Thus this passionate ode written by a man of 74 to the 36-year-old object of his desire (whom he met when she was 25) is combined with readings of their epistles, or else becomes fodder for thespian presentations. Apparently, Janacek's subterfuge in changing the name of the piece from "Love Letters" to "Intimate Letters" was not enough to quench the public's interest in its subtext.

Kamila Stoesslova was indeed an exotic beauty — Jewish, dark, with a hint of the Gypsy — and the composer of this white-hot music takes only seconds to introduce her in the viola part, which employs a recognizable Romany scale. The exoticism of the work as a whole owes its spicy flavor to the flutterings of the septuagenarian's heart at a time when he was obsessed with thoughts of aging. As a statement of yearning, it rivals the steamiest efforts of Franck or Wagner.

The piece was the subject of Rob Kapilow's lecture at the Walter Reade Theater on Monday evening. As in other installments of his What Makes It Great series, Mr. Kapilow discussed this piece of music and offered examples for his arguments at the piano. The group that

later performed the entire work, the Alexander Quartet, supplemented the lecture by sharing individual passages. This is a particularly effective and winning formula.

A show of hands indicated that almost all the audience members were unfamiliar with the piece, but none of them can now make this claim. Mr. Kapilow is a born educator. An enthusiastic and diminutive fellow, he is especially adept at physically following the music around the quartet, making it instantly intelligible for the uninitiated. He is also able to discuss music on two simultaneous levels, thus satisfying neophytes and sophisticates alike. In this lecture, he adroitly explored Janacek's colorful ability to move from the diatonic to the pentatonic, but assured those in the audience who may not be conversant with these terms that all they really needed to do was "get it in their ear."

I was particularly intrigued with Mr. Kapilow's distinction between "together" and "at the same time," an extremely important, though overlooked, musical concept. The ending of the second letter's Vivace section, enunciated by the quartet, was a perfect example of how players not performing together can be a positive trait.

After intermission, the quartet (Zakarias Grafilo and Frederick Lifszit, violins; Paul Yarbrough, viola; Sandy Wilson, cello) performed the entire piece straight through.

This rendition was the polar opposite

of the one offered by the Pacifica Quartet at Alice Tully Hall last Wednesday. Not better nor worse, mind you, but thoroughly different.

Where the younger Pacifica players exaggerated the ponticello effects — that is, bowing near the bridge — the Alexander group did a more polished job of integrating them into the work as a whole. Where the Pacifica was exuberant, the Alexander was measured. Considering that this piece is all about age difference, this contrast was especially relevant.

The Alexander has a big sound that would be perfect for Beethoven. But Janacek requires more delicacy, less bombast. Eloquent understatement was missing in both recent performances. Still, this was a solid effort.

The Alexander players expertly gave the erratic dances of the final missive just the right sense of being offkilter. It is this rhythmic awkwardness that leads to the final thoughts of death, of being out of sync with the universe. This is extremely difficult music to pull off, but the Alexander ensemble rallied for a thrilling conclusion. And we all knew it because we had just learned about the piece's nuances.

I would love to attend a lecture by Rob Kapilow about a piece I do not like. I have the distinct feeling that I would come away with a newfound and delighted appreciation.

B E S E N  A R T S

# San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, June 27, 2004

## Mozart: The “Haydn Quartets” Alexander String Quartet Foghorn Classics (3 CDs)

By Joshua Kosman  
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

The Alexander String Quartet, San Francisco’s purveyor of vibrant classicism and gritty contemporary music alike, continues to make splendid records. The group’s fine new release, a wise and expansive account of Mozart’s six string quartets dedicated to Haydn, makes clear what a mistake it would be to overlook their efforts. The performances are lithe, witty, and full of elegant touches both large and small; they boast a crisp, well-recorded sound that brings the listener into intimate contact with the players; and they encompass both the plain-spoken eloquence and sometimes hard-won intricacy of Mozart’s most consistent achievement in the genre. From the winsome vitality of the opening G-Major Quartet, K. 387, to the shadowy contrapuntal effects of the final “Dissonant” Quartet, the Alexanders bring a spirit of fervor and alertness to each piece.

B E S E N  A R T S

# The Strad

October 2004

## REVIEWS: CDS

### Renascence

**Bartók** String Quartet no. 6

**Ravel** String Quartet in F major

**Bach** (arr. Mozart) Fugue no. 7 in E-flat major BWV 876

### Alexander String Quartet

FOGHORN CLASSICS CD1984 [www.foghornclassics.com](http://www.foghornclassics.com)

This may seem on the face of it an odd combination of pieces, although in the sleeve notes Eric Bromberger goes some way towards justifying it, explaining that it's all to do with various forms of regeneration — the album's title is Renascence. Accordingly, Bartók develops the original Mesto Introduction to his Sixth Quartet's finale into an entire movement; Ravel creates his quartet cyclically out of two basic melodic shapes which metamorphose in various different ways; and the Bach fugue is all about revisiting a central idea constantly replenished by changes in contrapuntal context.

One of the main problems with the Bartók is its frequent use of textures and rhythmic profiles that wouldn't sound out of place in, say, Mendelssohn. It is a measure of the Alexander Quartet's success that it avoids any hint of 'wrong-note' music, even

in the Schumannesque dotted march rhythms of the second movement. Indeed such is the group's combined intensity and concentration that such passages sound utterly inevitable.

Nevertheless, there is a whiff of tonal sophistication and lack of earthiness that some Bartók admirers may feel leaves the darker aspects of the score understated. It is this quality, however, that makes the Alexander's Ravel so utterly compelling. Without upsetting the Classical purity that lies at the heart of this glorious work, the players radiate as much affectionate warmth as the music will take, bolstered by an exceptionally full and vivid recording. For the Bach fugue they create a viol-like, almost vibratoless sound world of noble restraint.

—Julian Haylock

# The Washington Post

Monday, April 26, 2004

## Meridian Arts Ensemble, Alexander String Quartet

While the Alexander String Quartet and the Meridian Arts Ensemble gave fine performances in their own right Saturday night at Coolidge Auditorium at the Library of Congress, there was no real connection between the two halves of the program except in showing the extremes within the chamber music repertoire.

The Meridian Arts Ensemble, a brass and percussion sextet, brought an alternately jazzy, rock-inspired and modernist sound to David Sanford's "Corpus," a carefully constructed work that places a serious chorale melody within various musical climates. The Meridian deployed an impressive array of effects and subtle variations in tempo, color and rhythm in Elliott Sharp's

"Beyond the Curve." The group knows how to turn up the volume, and the hall shook with exuberant sound of Frank Zappa "Echidna's Arf."

The Alexander String Quartet worked on a much more narrow and focused canvas, deploying a laserlike precision to render more inwardly drawn works.

After the spiky sound of Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet, the quartet gave a pulsing reading of Shostakovich's String Quartet in F-sharp Minor, Op. 108. Beethoven's String Quartet in F, Op. 135, slipped into an ethereal world about as far from the previous in-your-face brass works as you could possibly imagine.

—Daniel Ginsberg

B E S E N  A R T S

# The Virginia Gazette

Saturday, November 20, 2004

## Beautiful music from string quartet

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The Chamber Music Society of Williamsburg presents the Alexander String Quartet, with Zakarias Grafilo and Frederick Lifszitz, violin; Paul Yarbrough, viola; and Sandy Wilson, cello; in the Mozart String Quartet in E-flat Major, K. 428; Shostakovich String Quartet No. 7 in F-sharp Minor; and Brahms String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat Major; in the Williamsburg Library Arts Center Theater, November 9.

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The Alexander String Quartet continued the Chamber Music Society's current season with a finely played program that allowed the group to display its markedly mature sound and musicianship.

The Alexander appeared here in 1994 and, with the exception of the principal violin, has maintained the same membership, including the violist and cellist who founded the ensemble in 1981. So, the Alexander approaches its music-making with expected maturity and cohesion that come with time and constancy.

As the Alexander launched into the opening Mozart, it was quickly evident that the group is superbly matched. From

its beautifully blended sound to its evenly distributed talent to its interpretative skill, the ensemble displayed musical sensitivity and savvy.

While occasional post performance comment was heard concerning the compatibility of the works presented, the talent of the Alexander brought to each was never in dispute.

To the Mozart, the foursome brought nuance and heightened coordination and interpretation that made the work's mostly cheerful nature feel sunny and bright. Of similar nature was the Brahms, written during one of his happier periods. Largely relying on folk-inspired idioms, the work was played with brilliance and concentration that impressed.

However, the work that remains in memory as the focal point of the affair was the Shostakovich, with its distinctive plaintive lines and moods. While only 11 minutes long, the musical minutes were mesmerizing, most particularly in the combination of strings and haunting sounds, not to mention the meticulous care and interpretive depths the Alexander provided this finely etched and emotionally appealing selection.

—John Shulson

# The News-Gazette

Champaign-Urbana, Illinois

Saturday, October 4, 2003

## Alexander Quartet provides memorable musical evening

By JOHN FRAYNE

Old friends, with one new face, came back to the Foellinger Great Hall on Wednesday night for a long evening of distinguished, serious, but thoroughly enjoyable chamber music.

The Alexander Quartet has been here before, offering throughout the 2001-2002 season a complete cycle of Beethoven's Quartets, capping the season with the premiere of "Rise Chanting" by Augusta Read Thomas. This time they came with a new first violinist, Zakarias Grafilo, whose education and training are centered on the San Francisco area, where the quartet has a home base. Grafilo balances the geography of the group; second violinist Frederick Lifszit is from Boston, Paul Yarbrough, viola, is from Florida, and Sandy Wilson, cello, is from England.

During the pre-concert talk by the quartet, Grafilo's "fitting in" to the group during the last 15 months was the main topic. He has faced many challenges: learning all the Shostakovich quartets and, in all, adding between 40 to 50 quartets to his repertory. Judging by the performances last night, the quartet made the right choice in getting Grafilo. He is a fine violinist, with a clear attractive tone and virtuosity to spare for the show passages for the first violin.

The Alexander Quartet has been around for 23 years, and Yarbrough and Wilson have been with the group from the start. Another example of year-counting opened the evening. This is the 25th anniversary of the organization Chamber Music America. Small plastic glasses of champagne (with a choice of

alcoholic and non-alcoholic) were given out in the lobby, and, taking the wine into the hail, we toasted, with Michael Ross and the Alexanders, the health of chamber music.

The program might be irreverently described as a "Beethoven Sandwich," two Beethoven quartets with a Shostakovich quartet as filling. The evening began with the Second Quartet of the famous three "Razumovsky" Quartets, a group which is one of the crowning achievements of Beethoven's middle period. This work is the longest of the triad and, in the opinion of some critics, the most serious and perhaps "problematic."

The fresh and lyrical playing of Grafilo was obvious from the start. This group evidently knows the music intimately, and plays it with intensity and deep sympathy. This quartet made a good opener, but more exciting fare was to come.

The Shostakovich Quartet has that which many quartets have not, an exciting and fascinating origin and setting. The composer wrote it in 1960 in Dresden, amid evidences of the firebombing of 1945, and dedicated it "to the victims of fascism and war." It seemed to be intended as an equivalent to Strauss' tone poem, "A Hero's Life." It is full of references to Shostakovich's previous works, and its first theme is a musical equivalent, in German musical notation, of four letters of his name: "DSCH." The most striking detail is that he, faced with the dilemma of whether to join the Soviet Communist Party,

apparently intended to kill himself afterward. In the event, he joined the party instead. Ironies abound.

The Alexanders played the slow beginning with great feeling and the violent and hysterical middle movements with dervish-like abandon. The tragic and resigned closing pages were played with deep empathy, and long seconds followed the final notes before applause erupted.

Saving the best wine (or champagne) for the last was the subtext of this concert. The playing of the "Razumovsky No. 3," Beethoven's Ninth Quartet, was a triumph. This is a wonderful work, full of boundless energy and opportunities for a first-rate quartet to demonstrate their ensemble virtuosity. The Alexander Quartet rose to the occasion with superbly eloquent playing. Let me single out Sandy Wilson's pizzicato playing in the slow movement.

In the finale, Grafilo's virtuoso playing was matched by frenzied playing by the rest of the quartet. Beethoven, with all his seriousness, knew how to work an audience. Waves of applause followed, and the quartet returned, wearing blue baseball caps. Lifszit said the caps were gifts from the students of University High School, where quartet members had been guests during their visit. After removing the hats, the quartet played as encore an E-flat fugue from Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," arranged by none other than Mozart. In its dignified and graceful beauty, it was the perfect ending to a memorable evening.

B E S E N  A R T S

# Los Angeles Times

Wednesday, December 6, 2000

## Alexander String Quartet Shows Confident Versatility

### MUSIC REVIEW

By JOSEF WOODARD  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**O**n Monday at Cal State Northridge, in the first of three performances in the Music Guild chamber music series, the Alexander String Quartet served up a solid, well-rounded feast of works by the three masters of the quartet form spanning three centuries — Haydn, Beethoven and Bartók. They brought to each composer's work a requisite distinct character.

The San Francisco-based Alexander, formed in 1981, is making a return engagement with the Music Guild, and for good reason. This is a group deep in its element, firm in its stride.

Haydn's Quartet in C, the "Emperor," with its slow movement familiar after-the-fact as the German national anthem, emerged here as a model of gentility. Next up, Bartók's masterful Fourth Quartet — a piece that tends to steal the show when it is this well-played —

featured a thoroughly Modernist countenance. The players relished the

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hushed, coiled enigma of its second movement, the brusque whimsy of its pizzicato adventures, and its overall structural blend of care and abandon.

The Alexander is also well up on Beethoven, having recorded the complete quartets for a nine-CD set last year. Its take on the Quartet in A Minor, Opus 132, was engaging and richly understood. They seemed to comprehend that the heart of the work is the emotional third movement, a hymn to recuperation after one of Beethoven's bouts of illness.

B E S E N  A R T S

# San Francisco Chronicle

Thursday, March 2, 2000

## Alexander String Quartet Yielding Greater Riches

Dramatic, thoughtful program of late works at Herbst

By Joshua Kosman  
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

**T**he Alexander String Quartet has been a fixture on the Bay Area scene for so long now that it becomes all too easy to take the group for granted. Tuesday's superb recital in Herbst Theatre served as a cautionary reminder not to make that mistake.

Since 1989, the Alexanders — violinists Ge-Fang Yang and Frederick Lifszitz, violist Paul Yarbrough and cellist Sandy Wilson — have been quartet-in-residence with both San Francisco Performances (presenter of Tuesday's concert) and San Francisco State University.

During that time, the adventurousness and youthful vigor that marked the group's early performances seem to have been supplemented by a richer and more dark-hued ensemble sound, as well as greater interpretive clarity. The results were both thoughtful and dramatic.

### Final Quartets

For this event, the group offered an interesting program that featured the final quartets of Beethoven, Janacek and Mendelssohn. These are all late works, naturally, but they show their composers reacting differently to the gathering twilight.

Beethoven's F-Major Quartet, Op. 135, for all its existential baggage and the radiant expansiveness of the hymnlike slow movement, faces the end with relative equanimity. Here is the composer looking back with clear eyes and

ever-greater technical mastery on the styles and strategies of his youth, and the ensemble — which spent last year performing all 16 of the Beethoven quartets — delivered it with fleet brilliance and an apt sense of rhythmic freedom, especially in the outer movements.

The slow movement, though, was the crown of this performance, its densely woven chords and long-breathed melodies rendered with sumptuous allure.

### Impassioned Janacek

Janacek's Second Quartet, subtitled "Intimate Letters," is a protestation of love, like nearly everything he wrote in the last decades of his life. In the gnarly, impassioned writing of this remarkable score, brought to sinewy life by the Alexander Quartet, it's impossible to miss the force of the composer's astonishing infatuation with the young Kamila Stosslova.

The evening's most impressive music-making, though, came after intermission, with the group's vibrant and thrillingly cogent performance of Mendelssohn's F-Minor String Quartet.

Written during the few months between the sudden death of his beloved sister Fanny and his own death (of grief, more or less), this is a dark elegy in all but name. The group's playing caught the music's air of desolation in the wild, driven tremolos of the first movement and the breathless rush of the finale.

As an encore, the group gave a bright-hued account of the fourth movement from Beethoven's Op. 130.

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Monday, June 3, 2002

## Alexander String Quartet

By JAN JEZIORO

**T**he Alexander String Quartet gave the last of its three concerts in the Slee Beethoven Quartet Cycle at the University at Buffalo on Saturday evening.

The members of the Alexander Quartet — first violinist Ge-Fang Yang, second violinist Frederick Lifszitz, violist Paul Yarbrough and cellist Sandy Wilson — presented an evening of performances that fully justified the group's national reputation.

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**The Alexander String Quartet rolled over Beethoven, rounding out a three-day run of the Slee Beethoven Quartet Cycle in Slee Hall on Sunday.**

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The Alexander nicely sustained the necessary dramatic tension in the throbbing, dark-toned opening movement, of the Quartet in C minor, Op. 18, No. 4, playing with a warm vibrancy. A finely judged pace contributed a contrasting sense of restraint in the polyphonic Scherzo, while the highlight of the Menuetto was the eloquently played dialogue between viola and cello in the trio section. Both violinists sparkled in the final rondo, which ended with a furiously paced flourish.

The opening movement of Beethoven's last quartet, the Op. 135, had an agreeably tentative start, but a certain hesitancy in

the transitions among the various instruments hindered the conversational tone.

The Lento was beautifully played, with the perfectly sculptured phrasing creating a sense of enveloping solemnity. The Alexander demonstrated a remarkable ability to sustain a long, slow line, both here and in Thursday's performance of the Op. 132.

The final movement, with its famous questioning phrase "Must it be?" was played with the necessary sense of inevitability that Beethoven's ringing, affirmative answer, both to the question, and to the contradictions of the human condition, "It must be!" demands. The program notes correctly identified the motto's origin as being in a joke about an unpaid bill. However, the profound meaning that Beethoven later gave to the exchange, in a letter to a friend, tends to justify the traditional interpretation.

The opening Allegro of the Op. 59, No. 2, was played with a flowing, singing quality that neatly captured the shifting rhythms. The players worked their slow movement magic again in the Adagio, generating great warmth of feeling, along with genuine intensity. A firmly vigorous approach to the quirky theme of the Allegretto built excitement, but the treatment of the Russian song in the middle section felt somewhat rushed.

With his brilliant tone, the first violinist led the way in a highly animated treatment of the final Presto, with the exciting finish bringing the audience to its feet.

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# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Thursday, May 27, 1999

## Audience chooses well for string quartet

By R.M. CAMPBELL  
P-I MUSIC CRITIC

At first it seemed a gimmick to attract attention: Alexander String Quartet's request from its future Meany Hall audience to choose its program.

However, the quartet set some immediate restrictions. The concert was all-Beethoven and the choice of three works had to come from his early, middle and late periods. The polling was done by mail in advance of the concert, held Tuesday night. Most subscribers didn't bother to respond, but nearly 140 did, and they made choices that proved to make an eminently satisfying program.

Founded in 1981, the quartet began its life winning competitions and made a name for itself in the United States and Europe. Most quartets do not have all 16 Beethoven's quartets in performance readiness, but the Alexander had prepared them this season for a complete cycle in New York and San Francisco, where the quartet is based.

Seattle is not the first town where the quartet has polled its audience to arrive at a program. Last month in Los Angeles, the audience chose almost the same quartets as Seattle: B-flat Quartet (Op. 18, No. 6), E-flat Quartet (Op. 74) and C-sharp Minor Quartet (Op. 131). The difference was in the middle period, where Los Angeles opted for one of the Opus 59 quartets.

Even if the Beethoven popularity vote by the Meany audience was a stunt, the program was vital and appealing.

This is an excellent ensemble particularly noted for its extraordinary sense of ensemble. Rarely do quartets possess such unanimity in attack, timbre and musicality. The ups and downs of every phrase were carefully weighed and measured, then delivered without any seeming loss of spontaneity. Whatever disagreements may exist among the four men are ironed out in rehearsal, not performance. It is not surprising to learn the quartet has a link to the Tokyo String Quartet, another ensemble known for its precision.

The Alexander's overall approach is cohesive, supple, articulate and its tone clear. There is impressive refinement of detail and balance among the four, although first violinist Ge-Fang Yang has the brightest tone. He also went off pitch the most. The four seemed to have no trouble in adjusting between delicious exuberance and gravity.

The B-flat Quartet (Op. 18, No. 6), subtitled "La Malinconia," opened the concert in a bright, forward fashion. Melancholy was rarely heard in this cheerful piece: Even the Adagio, marked "La Malinconia," seemed only an interruption in the good times. The E-flat Quartet (Op. 74), subtitled the "Harp," was also rather merry in the main, with a handsome Adagio as the centerpiece.

As the representative of the late quartets, the C-Sharp Minor (Op. 131) was almost as much as one could expect. The reading had eloquence, beauty, pathos, even innocence, as Richard Wagner once remarked about the piece.

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