



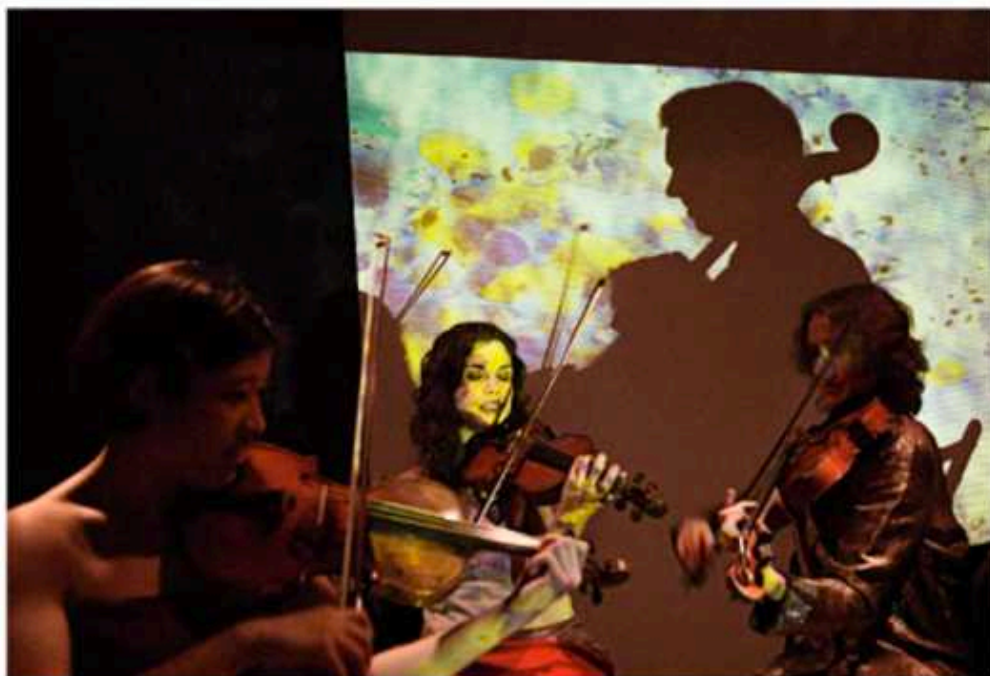
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MUSICAL EVENTS

THE POWER OF FOUR

String quartets multiply across New York.

BY ALEX ROSS



The Momenta Quartet, performing in a music-and-video series at the HiArt! Gallery.

Almost any day of the week, you can catch a string quartet performing in New York. In a three-day stretch in mid-January, I saw five concerts by four groups—the JACK Quartet, the Momenta Quartet, the Danish Quartet, and an unnamed Juilliard foursome. Earlier in the month, I was at Carnegie Hall for an all-Brahms program by the mighty Emerson Quartet, and also went to the Manhattan School of Music to attend the final event at the Robert Mann String Quartet Institute, led by the longtime first violinist of the Juilliard Quartet. Competing CDs of Beethoven and Shostakovich quartets crowd my desk. The genre has even gone Hollywood: “A Late Quartet,” Yaron Zilberman’s tale of a celebrated ensemble undergoing personal and medical crises, came out in November.

Cinematic melodramas notwithstanding, quartet players tend to be among the happier creatures in the classical kingdom. Turnover in leading groups is rare: when David Finckel leaves the Emerson, at the end of this season, it will be the quartet’s first change of personnel in thirty-four years. A job-satisfaction study conducted some years ago ranked quartet players at the top of the various professions surveyed, with orchestra musicians ranking lower, near the level of prison guards. If

such a study was done today, orchestras might descend yet further; one ensemble after another has lately fallen prey to financial turmoil and labor-management disputes. (The Minnesota orchestra has yet to perform an ordinary subscription concert this season, players having balked at a drastic pay cut.) The economic collapse of 2008, which is at the root of the current orchestral crisis, has also made life tougher for quartets, yet more than a hundred remain active in North America. Barry Shiffman, who co-founded the St. Lawrence Quartet and now oversees the Banff International String Quartet Competition, told me that while many presenters have cut back on their chamber programming, there has been an explosion of activity at summer festivals, and universities continue to provide a safe berth in the form of residency programs. “It has never been an easy calling,” Shiffman added.

Among the pitfalls are the wildly variable performing conditions. “Ninety-five percent of all halls are terrible,” Mann told the five young quartets who attended his institute. “We have to learn, in a sense, how to play in bad halls all the time.” Often, halls are simply too big. The quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven had their premieres either in private homes or in small-scale public spaces. In the later nineteenth century, venues were designed with chamber music in mind. Wigmore Hall, in London, with five hundred and forty-five seats, comes close to acoustical paradise. (On a recent visit there, I heard the Zaïde Quartet, a young French group, tearing into Hindemith’s Fourth Quartet.) In the twentieth century, as the audience for chamber music grew, quartets ventured into orchestral-sized halls, where they had to find a way to project their sound without losing intimacy. The Emersons manage that feat better than anyone else on the circuit, but the exercise of playing a Brahms quartet in a room three or four times larger than the ones the composer knew in Vienna and Berlin is fundamentally absurd. To hear such music in, say, the eighty-seat theatre of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York—where the Calder Quartet played some formidable Mozart and Beethoven in December—is a radically different experience. Distant, genteel sonorities become vivid, even more violent.

The economic dilemma is clear: intimate spaces give the best sound, yet you can’t make a living playing for a few dozen people a night. So the latest generation of quartet players is prepared to put on a show anywhere: concert halls, high-school auditoriums, gymnasiums, art galleries, bars, clubs. However irregular the circumstances, quartets have the advantage of extreme mobility: no ensemble, classical or pop, can set up or get out more quickly. Above all, quartets are perfectly—if sometimes neurotically—self-governing collectives. Autonomy has always been the chief appeal of this itinerant life; Joseph Joachim, the leader of the Joachim Quartet, a formative ensemble of the late nineteenth century, once described his group to Brahms as “our little four-voiced republic.”

The quartet repertory has undergone a major expansion, as recent performances demonstrate. When I was a kid, my parents regularly took me to hear chamber music, and I remember a steady diet of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Dvorák, with occasional spice of Ravel or Bartók. These days, the early twentieth century occupies the center. In a pair of concerts at the Stone, in the East Village, the members of the JACK Quartet, who specialize in new music, raised a few eyebrows by venturing back in time to Brahms, presenting his Clarinet Quintet in collaboration with the composer-clarinetist Derek Bermel. Their rendition was a bit raw, and gave pleasure for the reason. Bermel brought a tangy, Gypsy-like style to his solos in the Adagio, drawing closer to Brahms’s gruff spirit than clarinetists who fetishize a smooth, mellow tone. Bermel’s own quintet, “A Short History of the Universe (as Related by Nima Arkani-Hamed),” also had a free-wheeling folkish vibe, despite its cosmological title, which pays tribute to a leading string theorist. The JACK was most at home, though, in the shimmering, seething world of Ligeti’s Second Quartet, the last work of the night.

The Momenta, which formed in 2004, has drawn notice for its wide range, championing contemporary work while maintaining a hold on classic Viennese fare. I saw them at the HiArt! Gallery, on West Twenty-ninth Street, which has been hosting a music-and-video series under the

ageist of the composer of Matthew Greenbaum. John Cage's "String Quartet in Four Parts" accompanied deliquescing landscapes by the contemporary artist John Gurrin; Elizabeth Brown's "Piranesti," for theremin and strings, wove airy, eerie patterns around stop-motion video art by Lothar Osterburg, who, like the composer, drew inspiration from the fantastical architecture etchings of Giovanni Piranesi. (Brown doubled as thereminist.) There were strongly imagined new pieces by Kenneth Brown and David Fox, the one rich in dreamy textures and the other driven by propulsive counterpoint. Yet the Momentas were at their most potent in Haydn's Quartet Opus 20 No. 1, applying opulent, sustained legato in the slow movement. Few American players assume Haydn's idioms with such ease.

Graduates of leading conservatories have no trouble getting the notes right; getting the style right is another matter. Mann, in his Manhattan School workshops, urged participants to breathe life into the notation, to treat the instrumental lines as vocal phrases. (I watched two sessions, via Internet broadcast.) "I was constantly plagued by the lack of committed warmth to singing a piece of music," Mann told the Kleio Quartet. Likewise, he advised members of the Tesla Quartet to listen to a fiddler at a Hungarian restaurant in order to grasp the keening solos in the middle movement of Bartók's Fourth Quartet. Whether or not the Teslas had any luck tracking down a Hungarian fiddler in modern-day New York, they found sultrier tones at the closing concert, and the Kleios' account of the Janáček Second Quartet crackled with intensity, even as it stayed on pitch in high-flying passages. Brahms's C-Minor Quartet, in the hands of the Catalyst Quartet, rose to a rugged finish.

Even so, these performances felt too tight and tense at times, as if some invisible conductor were giving a strict beat. So it was good to encounter the rampaging energy of the Danish Quartet, at Scandinavia House, on Park Avenue. Whether in Mozart's D-Minor Quartet, Ligeti's First, or Nielsen's Fourth, these shaggy-haired Danes, who look as though they could be manning some inscrutable boutique in deepest Brooklyn, seemed to sing, dance, strut, and glide their way through the music. For the Dacapo label, they've recorded a superb survey of the Nielsen quartets; in vest and twang, it outdoes even vintage accounts by the Koppel Quartet, which had links to the composer. Whatever dark days await the larger institutions of classical music, quartets are furiously persisting. When the dinosaurs depart, the age of the mammals begins.