

# ORION STRING QUARTET

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### Orion shines as quartet takes on Beethoven

by Mary Kunz Goldman

Together 20 years, the Orion is known for its performances of modern music as well as its celebrity collaborations with artists including Yo-Yo Ma and Pinchas Zukerman. But there's nothing like a Beethoven quartet to put a group through its paces. Saturday, the Orion shone. The foursome is in a Beethoven groove these days, having just released the first installment of its complete recording of all the master's quartets. If Saturday's concert is any indication, that set should be fantastic.

The group's first violin chair alternates between Daniel and Todd Phillips, and in the "Serioso" quartet, Op. 95, Todd Phillips took the lead. He and his colleagues were focused from the word go -- high praise, considering this piece's sudden, challenging beginning. The brief first movement was fervent -- fevered, you could almost say. The sublime Allegretto, which includes some of the most heart-melting phrases Beethoven ever wrote, sang.

One of the Orion's fortes was evident throughout this problematic work, and that is the group's ability to play up surprises. Syncopations jumped out at you, and dynamics were handled crisply and neatly. The musicians play with tremendous vigor, too, digging into the music. Here we were, just one quartet

into the night, and already, violist Steven Tenenbom had a loose string hanging from his bow. Cellist Timothy Eddy played with muscle, too. These guys don't pull their punches. The second quartet was the Quartet in B Flat, Op. 18, No. 6, and the group's robust approach was perfect for the piece's Haydn-like qualities. This time, Daniel Phillips played first violin. His leadership was graceful and thoughtful. The pizzicato ending of the Adagio was especially enchanting.

As one might have expected, the scherzo was a special thrill, given the group's gift for syncopation. Here is another way in which the Orion shines: the musicians can make what they do sound spontaneous.

The evening's biggest mountain to climb was the Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132. This is the piece into which Beethoven worked his famous song of thanks for having recovered from an illness, and that beautiful interlude is at the center of a mercurial, often murky tour de force of a quartet. This was the Orion's chance to show everything it could do. The group rose to the occasion.

I can hardly remember a better-crafted performance. It had everything -- art, polish and a certain gritty excitement. I



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was so transported by the beauty of it all I didn't write all the details down as I should have. But I remember highlights. The second movement, the whistly trio section, if you could call it that, had a strange, haunting intensity. The Adagio was so ravishing that at the end both musicians and audience were overcome. The concluding Allegro Appassionato was like a toboggan ride. The piece ended in a burst of showmanship, with the musicians flinging their bows wide and the audience rising to applaud. You don't get much more Appassionato than this. What a marvelous night in the Slee series.