

MUSIC REVIEW

Four Who Are One, Togetherness to a Fare-Thee-Well

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The Brentano String Quartet, which played for the Chamber Music Society at Alice Tully Hall on Wednesday night, is something special. These are musicians who take the great priority of chamber performance — that of playing not so much out to the audience as in to one another, and to the music — to an exquisite extreme. Their musicmaking is private, delicate and fresh, but by its very intimacy and importance it seizes attention, just as in speech a floated suggestion or a quiet confession may strike far more deeply than a resolute pronouncement.

The Brentano players seem to have picked up this unassuming but

extraordinarily tight, versatile, sure and impressive art of rhetoric partly from listening to period-style performers. Rhythm gauged by the phrase rather than the measure, combined with delicacy of nuance, here sprung the music to life. Moments of fine-tuned nonvibrato playing in the fugue of the A major quartet from Haydn's Op. 20 were lovely to hear and right.

Apart from this Haydn piece, the group played Mozart's "Dissonance" quartet, Stravinsky's Three Pieces and the New York premiere of Charles Wuorinen's Fourth Quartet, a work of fine, delightful and, finally, unsettling beauty.

Playing continuously, Mr. Wuorinen's new work starts out rather slowly and mostly in chords, as if trying out ways of cadencing in a universe

Delicate and sure, the Brentanos use a period-style approach at times.

of wonderfully extended harmony. The first violin, typically, seems most keen to get out of this and into more linear, self-assertive playing, but the viola is the one to take the lead into lyricism, against the leader's explosive objections.

Those objections caused Mark Steinberg to break a string first time around, so that the performance had

to be restarted. Nobody could have minded hearing the radiant opening again, as played by Mr. Steinberg and his colleagues, Serena Canin on second violin, Misha Amory on viola and Nina Maria Lee on cello.

About halfway through, the music becomes more agitated, with all four players at cross-purposes. A strenuously but elegantly achieved resolution seems around the corner, but instead the four instruments find new territory: a long if interrupted melody they play largely in unison. In his note Mr. Wuorinen describes this as "a kind of repose," but it is a strange kind, intimating tensions that remain under wraps. A burst of pizzicatos and an emphatic crescendo chord brush off possibilities that could go on.

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