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## Alexander Quartet Makes 'Friends'

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The idea of a string quartet as a colloquy of four distinctive personalities is one of the hoariest musical clichés around. But "Among Friends" — Robert Greenberg's forceful String Quartet No. 3, which had its world premiere in Herbst Theatre Saturday night — finds vibrant new life in that old idea.

Written for the Alexander String Quartet, which gave it a fiery, well-balanced reading, the piece encompasses a half-hour's worth of arguments, cajoling, power struggles and shifting alliances among four fiercely intelligent and headstrong voices.

The first violin dreams of being a star, playing high coloratura lines while everyone else takes a back seat. The cello offers a curmudgeonly, often bluntly skeptical counterpoise. The second violin and viola, who speak their piece in a gorgeous duet called "Inner Voices," mediate between these two poles while maintaining distinct identities.

All of this could easily have devolved into a schematic exercise in combinatorial mathematics. But Greenberg, who teaches at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music

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and runs the San Francisco Symphony's "Discovery" series, has a keen sense of the human dimensions involved (his exuberant Second String Quartet, "Child's Play," also written for the Alexander, is a memorable musical travelogue into the world of toddlers).

#### Clear Dramatic Lines

In "Among Friends," Greenberg keeps the dramatic lines clear and the musical materials endlessly engaging. A broad, expository first movement, "With Friends Like These," sets the tone of passionate acrimony, after which a series of three short character sketches, played without a break, introduces the dramatis personae.

Then, in a striking feat of musical synthesis, Greenberg gathers up the previous thematic material and festering disagreements, and resolves it all with a movement aptly titled "Friendly Persuasion."

There follows a short coda, "All For One and One For All," in which Greenberg lifts a page from Chopin's Second Piano Sonata and sends the players scurrying in snaky unisons toward the ending.

As canny as the piece's overall structure is, its musical details are even more illuminating. Greenberg's gift is to write music that appeals to an audience without condescension; his themes are at once unusual enough to be interesting and accessible enough to be recognized when they return.

The slow movement "Little Hands and Little Feet," in which the first violin finally achieves its moment of solo glory, is a stretch of ravishingly beautiful writing. The piece's rhythmic byplay, especially in "Friendly Persuasion," is a steady stream of surprises and witty reversals.

Only the first movement left me unsatisfied. The dissonant chords and biting off-rhythms that Greenberg intended as arguments struck me as rather petty squabbling, and the fact that all four players were in agreement about the most fundamental matters of tempo and rhythm made their disagreements feel particularly minor.

But the performance itself was masterful, and the rest of the program, presented by San Francisco Performances, was on a comparably high level.

Violinists Ge-Fang Yang and Frederick Lifszitz, violist Paul Yarbrough and cellist Sandy Wilson,

who have been in residence in San Francisco since 1987, gave one of their most alluring and heartfelt performances to date.

#### Color and Passion

The program began with Beethoven's Quartet in C Minor, Op. 18, No. 4, in a reading full of instrumental color and bridled passion. If the second movement seemed a little bloodless, the focused intensity of the two concluding movements more than compensated.

But the evening's most exquisite playing came after intermission, with a revelatory and tonally magnificent rendition of Dvorak's Quartet No. 13 in G, Op. 106.

The energetic rhetoric of the first and third movements maintained a compelling force, and the group pursued all the mood and tempo shifts of the finale with notable aplomb.

Best of all was the slow movement, in which the ensemble playing boasted a depth and richness that were simply breathtaking.