

TUESDAY, MAY 4, 1993

Lively 'Child's Play' By Alexander Quartet

By Joshua Kosman
Chronicle Staff Critic

The Morrison Artists' Series concluded its season at San Francisco State University Sunday afternoon with a concert by the Alexander String Quartet, the university's quartet in residence, featuring Robert Greenberg's frolicsome "Child's Play."

The six-concert series has featured "Quartets from Around the World," with each quartet including in its program a piece by a compatriot. The Alexander's token American was Oakland composer Greenberg, whose three-movement work was written for the quartet and premiered here in 1988.

Sunday, Greenberg's evocation of fun and games among the lollipop set proved as enchanting and vivid as it had five years ago. In writing marked by textural clarity and rhythmic bounce, Greenberg sketches a childhood world of manic energy punctuated by pauses for breath.

The first movement, "Games," paints the picture most explicitly, as Greenberg sets the four players chasing after one another in a hyperactive frenzy, sometimes in unison and other times scattered. Most delightful, perhaps, is the way the movement's energy level mimics that of small children — drooping after a particularly lively outburst, then gearing up again as the participants egg each other on to a new round.

The second movement, "Sogni

d'Oro" ("Dreams of Gold"), is a slow, pulsing lullaby that serves as an interlude before the finale ("Dances") brings more vigorous explosions. The quartet's performance caught both contrasting moods ably.

The rest of the afternoon was devoted to Schubert, who fared less well. Opening the program was the Quartettsatz in C Minor, D. 703, and the quartet — violinists Ge-Fang Yang and Frederick Lifitz, violist Paul Yarbrough and cellist Sandy Wilson — gave it a reading marked by impressively subtle dramatic control but more than a little choppiness.

The real disappointment, though, came after intermission, with an ill-tuned, often clumsy account of the great C-Major Quintet. Joining the quartet for the occasion was cellist Laszlo Varga, for 16 years the Morrison Series' artistic director.

But Varga's presence was not enough to keep this performance on track. Its one real success was the slow movement, played with tonal depth and a stateliness that never lagged.

The slow-moving trio of the scherzo movement also sounded appealing, if lightweight. But the other three movements were marked by a few slips in cohesion and many flaws of intonation, which grew more numerous and more egregious as the piece progressed.