

For one electric moment, Alexander is a great quartet

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IN THIS week of election fever, the Alexander String Quartet brought three candidates of its own to San Jose on Sunday: Joseph Haydn, Robert Greenberg and Ludwig van Beethoven.

That meant two long-established front-runners, plus a recent entry stimulating lively, positive commentary.

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The landslide winner: Beethoven. But for that, credit the Alexander Quartet as much as Beethoven himself.

The all-male foursome never jelled until the Beethoven Quartet, Op. 59, No. 3 in C. Here the group launched into the kind of passionate, hold-your-hats playing that invited comparisons to the

great Budapest String Quartet, a Russian-emigre group which reigned for more than three decades till the mid-1960s. I haven't heard comparable electricity from anybody else in the intervening years, in a style where finesse is secondary to unbridled fury, force and velocity.

It was the most exciting quartet experience sponsored by the San Jose Chamber Music Society for years, and that includes previous concerts by the same foursome. You wished that the same feisty, furious element could have penetrated and enlivened the Alexandrians' other selections.

It's a very stimulating group from San Francisco, with strengths and weaknesses. The addition of first violinist Ge-Fang Yang from China has ener-

gized the players in new directions, despite some flaws: some pitch bending in Yang's highest register, and little sense of ensemble between the four men — a factor partly attributable to their using new instruments. Their rhythm and speed were dazzling.

Far less convincing was their stance in the low-key, very late Haydn Quartet, Op. 76, No. 6, a piece showing some of the same avant-gardish wanderings toward a tonality at the opening as the Beethoven written a generation later. It was as if the four were together for the first time; the bowing was inarticulate.

San Francisco composer Greenberg, the 38-year-old director of Composers Inc., was represented by his second quartet, "Child's Play," which is anything but that. Given his strong and shifting rhythmic accents, the opus puts

him stylistically somewhere on the road between Beethoven's "Great Fugue" and Bartok's early pieces — not at all a bad road to choose! It's rooted in tonality over the three contrasting movements, with the curtain-raising "Games" section chordally constructed.

The effect of the performance at the First Unitarian Church was vibrant enough to evoke an encore: Schubert's fragment from 1820, the C Minor "Quartettsatz" ("Movement of a Quartet"), D. 703, which I'm surprised no opportunistic publisher ever baptized the "Unfinished" Quartet. Given its fantastic-demonic characteristics, it was just right for Halloween weekend, too.

The next program in the series is the Arioso Wind Quintet with music of the Americas, Nov. 22.