

# Review

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## CHAMBER MUSIC

### Spanning the Centuries, With Style

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Jeremy Menuhin



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By Michelle Dulak Thomson

The Alexander Quartet's recital Saturday night at Herbst Theater was a reminder, if any be needed, that not all the world-class chamber-music performances in the Bay Area are by visiting ensembles. The Alexander Quartet seems to have settled well into its current configuration, with Zakarias Grafilo as first violin; certainly their playing Saturday was to a very high standard, and in a very varied and difficult program.

Granted, the Alexanders' opener — Mozart's E-flat Quartet, K. 428 — was a little on the plush-and-complacent side for my taste: good, solid, attractive American-style quartet playing, but settled and outward-projected in a way that slights a whole side of the music. It seems churlish to find any fault at all in playing so assured, so polished, so unanimous (the various unison attacks were a marvel of ensemble — I'm thinking especially of the *forte* dotted-rhythm bits of the first movement's second theme, but it was true everywhere). But it all went as though on rails, and I can't recall any instance of a player even seeming to react to something another had done. There's a lot of quartet repertoire in which that sort of singlemindedness is a virtue; in Mozart, I'm afraid, it generally leaves me cold.

That said, the slow movement was beautifully shaped (Sandy Wilson's cello line, subtly underpinning everything, was especially fine); and the finale, in which Grafilo drove the quartet at a daring pace, was terrific.



**Alexander Quartet**

The Shostakovich 14th Quartet that followed was something else again. The piece is unusually tricky even for Shostakovich, extremely discursive in a way that makes it hard for a quartet to keep the thread, not supplied (as many of the quartets are) with a nice brutal scherzo to keep the audience's attention, and helpfully cast in the unfriendly six-sharp key of F# major. It's sparsely scored most of the time, very often reduced to two instruments, or a single line with interjections from the other three players. In one place in the finale, the "single line" gets taken to what is for the players a hair-raising extreme: there's only one line, but the parts trade off beat by beat, so that what you hear is a continuous stream of notes, but what a given player does is only to interject two or three notes in a bar, at the right moment. Saturday the Alexanders managed this perfectly until the very end, where someone (I don't know who) missed a step and there was a gap.

### **Ardor and ease**

But the peculiar atmosphere of the 14th Quartet is hard to describe. The lyrical parts of it are more like late Janáček than anything else — rich, strange, seemingly from another world. (The key is part of that, I think; Janáček had the same taste for remote keys.) Sandy Wilson played the ridiculously demanding cello solos ardently, but with, I'm inclined to think, less strain than they needed — marvelous ease, and his by-now-familiar magnificently clear and open sound, but somehow the affect was wrong. This is supposed to feel harder than that. The music worked without the strain, but it took some personal readjusting to accustom myself to not hearing it.

Jeremy Menuhin joined the group after intermission for the Brahms Piano Quintet. I've never seen a piano

quintet set up quite like this. All the stagehands did was raise the lid of the piano that had been behind the quartet for the first half. The quartet's seats didn't budge; and they were still in the conventional sort of horseshoe configuration, cello and first on the outsides. In practice, what that meant is that the second violinist had his back to Menuhin and was right in front of him, while the violist and cellist were round the side of the instrument, and practically speaking only the first had any hope of communicating with the pianist. Given those constraints, the ensemble was rather remarkable, especially in the scherzo (which has its syncopated perils). Menuhin's playing was interesting, stressing inner voices in a way I haven't heard before, and powerful without "banging." All the same, it was irritating that I couldn't see him.

But before the Brahms came a surprise: a new quartet by Robert Greenberg, in honor of San Francisco Performances founder Ruth Felt and the series' 25th anniversary. The quartet, Greenberg's fourth, was titled *Snappy Rejoinder*, and it certainly was that. The three compact movements each had the air of saying what they meant to, and then departing. The first, "Walk," was largely pizzicato, and I imagine its many "snap" pizzicati were by way of a pun on the title of the piece. There are various instrumental solos, including one for the second violinist (Fred Lifstiz) that deliberately goes on a little long. (Grafilo looked theatrically out at the audience.) Lifstiz, or rather his instrument, got comeuppance in the third movement ("Buzz"), whose central section involved his slapping the back of his violin rhythmically, while his colleagues played a unison line replete with what I'm reliably informed are called "disco screams." In between came a remarkably beautiful slow movement called "Sub" — referring to the chord substitutions in its densely harmonized, intense passacaglia. It was a piece brilliantly written and full of imagination, and certainly worthy of its dedicatee.

(Michelle Dulak Thomson is a violinist and violist who has written about music for *Strings*, *Stagebill*, *Early Music America*, and *The New York Times*.)

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