

Robert Mann (1920-2018), founder of the Juilliard String Quartet

By Fred Mazelis
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Robert Mann, who died at the age of 97 on New Year's Day, was perhaps the single most important figure in the expansion of the audience for chamber music in the United States and elsewhere over the past 70 years.

The founder of the Juilliard String Quartet, named after the world-renowned music conservatory where its members had studied, Mann remained first violinist of the ensemble for 51 years, until he retired in 1997. By that time he had performed some 6,000 concerts with the group, whose other founding members included violinist Robert Koff, violist Raphael Hillyer and cellist Arthur Winograd.

Mann's role was a special one. While other positions in the quartet regularly saw changes, Mann remained. He embodied the musical continuity of the group, while it also expanded its repertoire and added contemporary compositions to the mix of works it performed. The Juilliard Quartet continues to this day, but Mann's influence was felt both in terms of its history and through the teaching he continued in the most recent decades.

Speaking of the continuous need to adapt his playing to the styles and contributions brought by new members of the quartet, Mann once said, "It worked wonderfully, and I have in a sense learned to be an eternally youthful person." This youthful and very informal personality was reflected in the fact that the well-known, venerable and venerated violinist was almost universally known, even in old age, as Bobby.

Robert Mann was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1920. His father, a tailor and grocer, though he had no knowledge of music, found ways to enable his son to develop his musical gifts. Mann later recounted that until he reached his teenage years his ambition was to be a forest ranger. He quickly progressed, however, as

a violinist under private instruction, studying in New York at what later became known as the Juilliard School and winning the prestigious Naumburg Foundation award in 1941.

While admiring the skill and brilliance of violin virtuosos, Mann turned toward the collaborative music-making characteristic of chamber music. As the *New York Times* obituary notes, he later explained, "I could not conceive of myself playing those old chestnuts and getting pleasure from them again and again. I had not been a wunderkind. ... The virtuoso looks for two things: those vehicles that allow him or her to display absolute wizardry on the instrument, and capturing that psychology of communication that knocks an audience dead."

"These things were not as meaningful to me," he added, "as the social phenomenon of making music among equals and the fact that, in chamber music, the composer was not interested in knocking anybody dead but in giving expression to his most subtle and complicated thoughts."

A fuller appreciation of Mann's role requires some understanding of the history of the string quartet. The combination of two violins, viola and cello is the most common one in chamber music, although the trio of violin, piano and cello, as well as the combinations of piano and three or four string instruments, are also well known.

While the combination of four string instruments can be traced back even into the seventeenth century, it was the Austrian master Joseph Haydn who essentially invented the form in the 1750s. The string quartet, because of the small number as well as the similar tone color of the instruments involved, lends itself to logical disputation, a kind of democratic exchange of musical ideas, rather than the massive depictions of mood and

drama made possible by the orchestral combination of strings, winds, brass and percussion instruments, with their sheer numbers as well as different tone colors.

It is the collaborative character of chamber music—the way in which different musical lines combine, and the ability of three, four and sometimes five or six musicians (very occasionally seven or eight) to produce music that is intellectually stimulating and emotionally involving at the same time—that can make the music so memorable, especially in live performance. The performance of a large symphony has its own power, of course, but it is of a different kind.

Haydn, with his 68 string quartets and 104 numbered symphonies, was the most prolific among classical composers, as well as being the inventor of both of these forms that have come down to us from more than a quarter of a millennium ago. The musical quality of Haydn's large oeuvre is amazing, but he laid the basis for another few centuries of musical marvels.

Speaking only about the string quartet, Haydn was followed by the no less inventive Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, with 23 quartets. Ludwig van Beethoven's 16 quartets, especially the so-called Late Quartets (Nos. 12-16, plus the Grosse Fugue), are generally considered to be the musical summit of the form, but they were followed by the quartets (and other chamber music) of Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Antonin Dvorak, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and other nineteenth century masters.

In the last century, the quartet form was utilized especially by Béla Bartok and Dmitri Shostakovich, but also by Maurice Ravel, Leoš Janacek, Benjamin Britten and others less well known, including late twentieth century composers championed by Robert Mann and the Juilliard String Quartet. Among these are Elliott Carter, whose atonal music was frequently performed by the Juilliard, even though it has not attracted a wide audience.

The current members of the Juilliard Quartet include first violinist Joseph Lin, second violinist Ronald Copes, violist Roger Tapping and cellist Astrid Schween. The preminent role of Juilliard is reflected not only in the sheer number of concerts it has performed and continues to perform all over the world, but also in the fact that Mann and other members of the quartet taught and mentored younger ensembles that have themselves become among the most widely

known and respected, including the Emerson, Tokyo and Brentano Quartets.

Over the years, the several recitals (usually free or low-cost) given annually by the Juilliard Quartet as the resident ensemble at the Juilliard School of Music always attracted capacity audiences and stand-by lines of listeners hoping to get a seat.

After his retirement, Robert Mann continued teaching, and some composition as well. He taught at both the Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music, where his son Nicholas Mann is the chair of the String Department. Robert Mann was also the subject of an award-winning 2013 documentary, *Speak the Music*.

In recent years, the Manhattan School has conducted a weeklong Robert Mann String Quartet Institute, including intense study and master classes in early January, culminating in a concert open to the public on the first Sunday of the new year. This year's Institute concluded on January 7, six days after Robert Mann's death, with a concert featuring three young string quartets.

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