

# The New York Times

Music Review | American String Quartet

## A 1988 Commission, Revisited on an Anniversary

By ALLAN KOZINN

Published: September 13, 2010

The American String Quartet is celebrating its 35th anniversary this season, and the Manhattan School of Music, where it has been in residence for 26 of those years, is



giving a party in the form of a three-concert retrospective, with two performances at the school and one at Merkin Concert Hall.

At the first installment, at the Manhattan School on Sunday afternoon, works by Haydn and Ravel framed a piece the group had commissioned from George Tsontakis in the late 1980s, and the concert was so beautifully played and so rich in interpretive nuance that a listener who had not been especially impressed

with this quartet in the past left the hall feeling that the two remaining concerts should not be missed.

The first pleasant surprise was the dark burnished tone the group applied to the opening of Haydn's Quartet in G (Op. 77, No. 1), a courtly work in which a touch of velvet is not amiss, at least in the first two movements, but which also demands an ability to pivot quickly between elegance and forcefulness. In the Adagio, the players — Peter Winograd and Laurie Carney, violinists; Daniel Avshalomov, violist; and Wolfram Koessel, cellist — used vibrato sparingly, yet their sound could not have been more sumptuous. And they gave energetic but carefully shaped accounts of the Menuetto and the Presto finale.

Mr. Tsontakis's Quartet No. 4, "Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart," was composed in 1988 for this ensemble, which recorded it (with Mr. Tsontakis's Quartet No. 3, for New World) in 1991. It is a magical piece, and much of its power comes from something borrowed: a Russian Orthodox chorale, played at the start in a soft-focus, vibrato-free style.

The chorale returns infrequently and briefly, but hints of it — or at least, the expectation that it will be heard again — suffuse the score, which wanders light-years from this first, Renaissance-tinged impulse. Involved, insistent dialogues animate the Scherzo, and an eerily serene, dolorous postlude, "The Madonna Weeps," is built around an exquisite first violin line. This is entirely nondogmatic writing: by juxtaposing moves from whatever era or style suits him, including various contemporary "isms," Mr. Tsontakis has created a gripping, picturesque language that keeps a listener guessing what will come next.

The concert ended with a supercharged performance of the Ravel Quartet in F that began with the same ear-catching, deep timbre as the Haydn but expanded kaleidoscopically, in ways that the Ravel (and, for that matter, the Tsontakis) allows and the Haydn does not. In the pizzicato passages in the second movement, and in the vigorous finale, the musicians' playing was the picture of ensemble unity.