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American String Quartet

Weill Recital Hall

Looking back was the theme of Friday's Walter W. Naumburg Foundation concert at Weill Recital Hall — part of a series celebrating past winners of its prestigious prize. And the American String Quartet, which won in 1974, did just that.

First, it looked back to Alban Berg's Op. 3 quartet, mellow and organic, playing with a dark throatiness from the opening crunchy second violin line, like a footstep in dead leaves: each phrase subtle, reined in, refracted through all the instruments to yield ever new patterns, like colored beads in a kaleidoscope.

Then it looked to the recent past with an emotional "Triptych" written about 9/11 by Robert Sirota, president of the Manhattan School of Music. It is a challenge, today, to convey chaos in a tonal language: the first movement, illustrating the fall of the towers, struggled to go beyond agitation, rising and falling from long-held notes, dying away, that sought to hold together the dispersing clouds of music. The second movement was a sorrowful meditation, while the third sought to make peace with a kind of lullaby that evanesced in fillics of ascending notes.

For the Schubert C major quintet the group looked back to its original cellist, David Geber, who after a wild and slightly muddy first movement coalesced with the others into a single, remarkable organ of sound. Peter Winograd's first violin sent out questioning phrases while the other players steadily built in intensity; when the phrases returned they had

clearly been answered, but the intensity continued to build for the remainder of an edge-of-the-seat performance.

ANNE MIDGETTE

Music in Review



Photographs by Jennifer Taylor for The New York Times

Among the pieces performed by the American String Quartet was Robert Sirota's emotional "Triptych."