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review

## Pacifica Quartet shows why it's soared so fast

By Kyle MacMillan

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Although just more than a decade old, the Pacifica Quartet has, by just about any measure, reached the pinnacle of its field.

Two huge markers of such status came in 2009, when the group won the Grammy Award for best chamber-music performance and was named ensemble of the year by Musical America.

More important than honors, however, is the strength of Pacifica's playing, which a Friends of Chamber Music audience got to experience up close at a sold-out concert Wednesday evening in Gates Concert Hall. Making its third appearance on the series, the quartet did not offer anything as prickly or challenging as it did in 2007 with Elliott Carter's Quartet No. 1, but it nonetheless presented a full, commendably diverse program drawn from three centuries.

Through it all, the many strengths of this top-drawer ensemble were manifest, including probing intensity, impeccable balance, radiant tone and ingrained cohesion.

The evening opened with Robert Schumann's Quartet in A minor, Op. 4 1/1, which offers fascinating, sometimes forward-looking twists on conventional Austro-Germanic romanticism. The Pacifica's ironclad belief in this infrequently heard work was obvious in every passage of this commanding interpretation. Contemporary composer Jennifer Higdon is well-known for creating vivid sonic worlds, and this is exactly what she does in her masterful, three-movement 1993 composition, "Voices."

The quartet brought pinpoint precision and blend to this intense and ultimately moving work. Dramatically capping the evening was the program's best-known piece, Dmitri Shostakovich's Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110, an alternately forlorn, manic and angry work with the ugly beauty so associated with this composer.

The Pacifica is recording the complete cycle of Shostakovich's amazing quartets and has an obvious affinity for them. It delivered rawness, power and sensitivity in an authoritative performance that was profoundly haunting and moving.

After an enthusiastic, well-deserved ovation, the quartet returned to the stage for one encore — a gentle, moving take on Ludwig van Beethoven's revered Cavatina movement from his String Quartet No. 13.

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