

# The New York Times

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## *An Ensemble Tackles Beethoven's String Quartets: Bring Your Lunch, the Seats Are Free*



On Monday around noon, while thousands of students, faculty members and protesters were gathering at Columbia University for an appearance by the Iranian

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president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, some appreciative music lovers crowded into the campus's Philosophy Hall to hear the excellent Pacifica Quartet perform Beethoven.

The event kicked off a series of free lunchtime concerts, beginning at 12:30, in which the Pacifica will present all 16 Beethoven string quartets, one per performance, in an ideal room for chamber music. I could not be at Monday's program, but I attended the second, on Tuesday, featuring the String Quartet in E flat, Op. 74 ("Harp"). The place was packed with people who relished the chance to break up their day with an up-close encounter with Beethoven.

Audiences have precious few chances to hear chamber music

in chamber-sized rooms like Philosophy Hall. Seats set up for the concerts accommodated about 130 people. A few dozen more listeners sat on tabletops and leaned against the walls. The series is presented by the Miller Theater in collaboration with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia, and to begin, George Steel, executive director of the Miller Theater, welcomed the audience.

People should feel free to eat their tuna fish sandwiches while listening, he said, because "it's that kind of concert." Mr. Steel apologized for any noise that might filter in from outside, like trucks rumbling down nearby Amsterdam Avenue or the sights and sounds of chatty students walking on pathways right outside the windows. In truth, the only bothersome distraction was the clicking camera of a photographer for The New York Times who took pictures throughout the performance.

Three members of the Pacifica Quartet first met and played mu-

sic together as teenagers in Southern California. Since its founding 13 years ago, the quartet has won deserved acclaim. I have been a fan since 2002, when these courageous musicians played Elliott Carter's five formidably difficult quartets on a single program at the Miller Theater.

To begin Tuesday's program, the group's affable violist, Masumi Per Rostad, discussed the "Harp" Quartet and, with his colleagues, played excerpts to illustrate his points. The dynamic and insightful performance would have been newsworthy no matter where it had taken place. In the Adagio they achieved a delicate balance between wistful calm and lyrical intensity. It was exciting to be so near the musicians as they dashed through the fitful Presto, taking risks but always in control.