The Juilliard String Quartet is arguably America’s best-known chamber music ensemble—and certainly one of the most admired. And although its current members are only in middle age, the quartet itself cannot escape the adjective “venerable.” Violinist Robert Mann founded the group in 1946 with violist Raphael Hillyer, cellist Arthur Winograd and the late violinist Robert Koff. With Mann in the first violinist’s chair for an amazing fifty of the ensemble’s sixty-one years—and with remarkably few other personnel changes—the quartet has performed and recorded, taught aspiring chamber musicians, championed American composers, and introduced at least two generations of concertgoers to the European masterworks. In 1962—with Isidore Cohen as second violinist and Claus Adam as cellist—the Juilliard succeeded the legendary Budapest String Quartet as ensemble-in-residence at the Library of Congress and went on to perform there often broadcasting live concerts nationwide for 40 years.

In recognition of its extraordinary contribution to the nation’s cultural life, the Juilliard String Quartet has been named the 2008 recipient of Chamber Music America’s Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, the organization’s highest honor.

On January 6, 2008, founding members Mann, Winograd, and Hillyer will join Earl Carlyss (violin II from 1966 to 1986) and the current quartet—violinists Joel Smirnoff and Ronald Copes, violist Samuel Rhodes, and cellist Joel Krosnick—to receive the award at CMA’s Thirtieth Anniversary National Conference in New York City.

In honor of the occasion, Chamber Music magazine invited some of the ensemble’s colleagues, collaborators and former students to offer some views and some memories. Their contributions follow on these pages.
The Juilliard String Quartet was formed right after World War II, at a time when all the established, important quartets here were European in origin. Young men (including violinist Robert Mann) had just come back from the armed services; many were going back to school. America was a power, and America had a profile of not being hidebound by European traditions, of having a fresh way of looking at things. Those are clichés, I suppose; but the Juilliard did play in a different style from everybody else. They were the Young Turks, known as “these brash Americans,” as much for their style as for their nationality.

It’s not easy to characterize their way of playing, but if I had to describe it, I’d certainly say they were bold, direct, incisive—less “civilized,” the Europeans might term it. Of course, you can’t really make any single statement about their playing; over the decades their approach evolved: the personnel changed, and of course individual people develop and mature.

You’d think that for any group of musicians who play a lot of concerts, at least some concerts would have to be routine. But the Juilliard String Quartet doesn’t know how to do that. Some musicians that you work with, when they’ve done the piece before, might say it was bold, direct, incisive—less “civilized.”

They don’t take for granted the responsibility and challenge of, for instance, maintaining a high standard in every lesson they teach and with every group they coach. The Juilliards are concerned that every aspect of their musical life be of high quality; I know how much they practice, separately and together. They don’t know what it means to be routine, or to take a concert for granted—or, for that matter, to take their standard for granted. I think that makes them kind of special, and it defines the Juilliard String Quartet.

Elliott Carter

The Second String Quartet

Round 1960 I was commissioned by a string quartet in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The piece turned out to be my second String Quartet. I was rather slow in completing the piece, and by the time I finished it and sent them the score, they determined that it would not fit into their pattern. In the meantime, they had engaged a student at Ann Arbor to copy the individual parts. I then showed the score to the Juilliard Quartet, and they said they very much wanted to perform the piece. So we got the parts from Ann Arbor and then discovered that these parts were not very easy to read, so we had to recopy a new set of parts.

The piece was finally presented by the Juilliard Quartet many times on tour, and it won quite a few awards. It all turned out quite successfully due to their remarkable efforts. It was also the first time they had played a quartet of mine. They then decided to learn and perform my first quartet. Then the Juilliard School commissioned my third quartet, and it was also performed by the Juilliard Quartet. This quartet had been previously played by another American string quartet who had felt it necessary to devise a click track to enable them to stay together as an ensemble, since this piece was rather complicated rhythmically and extremely difficult, I think. But the Juilliard Quartet decided that they would not use a click track, and I think they were right in their decision, since using this device often produced a rather dreary performance. This decision did require them to rehearse an unbelievable number of hours to learn how to fit all the parts together.

These quartets received the Pulitzer Prize on two occasions, all due to the efforts of the Juilliard Quartet and their beautiful performances of my music.


Mann, Carlyss, Krosnick, Rhodes, circa 1976
Imbrie, Laderman, Lehmdal, Martino, Perle, Piston, Shapey, Thomson and many others. And the performances spoke for composers with authority, for the Juilliard knew some of the composers personally, and in some instances were able to play for—or even with—their music.

The Juilliard began its remarkable 40-year tenure at the Library in 1962. In a series known for hosting renowned ensembles, the quartet was now the home team, playing as many as 24 concerts in some seasons. The tremendously enthusiastic and sophisticated audience for the library’s chamber music series, who had long followed the Budapest String Quartet, continued to queue up at dawn at Campbell’s Music Store, where the coveted tickets went on sale every Monday morning.

The roster of the Juilliard’s guest artists was an all-star lineup and included (to mention only a few) Arthur Rubinstein, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Walter Trompler, and Claudio Arrau. Like the members of the Budapest, the Juilliard players were avid baseball fans, in one instance checking out World Series scores until only moments before one of the live broadcasts that took their music to fans throughout the country. In concert and on the air, they continued to introduce new compositions, including works written expressly for them, such as Henri Dutilleux’s Ainsi la nuit, a Koussevitzky Foundation commission, and Richard Wernick’s Horn Quintet, a 40th-anniversary commission of the Library’s Irving Fine Fund. And throughout this long and fruitful residency, they played the Library’s Strads in more than 560 concerts.

A few Library of Congress snapshots of the Juilliard: Seeing them as master teachers, working with students at all levels, from inner-city youngsters, new to the stringed instruments, to young professionals. Hearing remarkable solo or duo performances by each player—Sam Rhodes playing Hindemith viola sonatas; Joel Krosnick’s amazing cello retrospective with Gil Kaish; Bobby and Nicholas Mann in a duo recital; wonderful violin-and-piano chamber performances by Ron Copes and Christopher Oldfather, Earl Carlys and Ann Schein. Having the chance to hear Joel Smirnoff play jazz, or co-host a radio program. Colleagues bravely going out to the street to turn away a large, overflow crowd for Bobby Mann’s last Washington appearance with the quartet. Taking the Juilliard on a run-out tour to California to celebrate its 40th anniversary. We all send our warm congratulations to past and present members of the Juilliard String Quartet, a magnificent product of a rich European heritage and a uniquely American musical environment. They have played an unforgettable part in the history of great performances at the nation’s library.

T he Juilliard String Quartet has been in my life since I was a kid. They first entered my consciousness through a series of LPs that became iconic for me. I first came to understand and be inspired by the Ravel and Debussy String Quartets; the Dvořák Piano Quintet with Rudolf Firkusny; the Schumann quartets; and later, the Bartók quartets. As I got to be an older teenager, I evolved (with my quartet-head buddies) to the point of comparing recordings, often of the same works, by earlier and later Juilliard Quartets, and marveling at the differences in the group’s style and character, the extent to which each personnel change affected the quartet and caused it to grow, adapt and unfold. A particular watershed, to my way of listening, was the moment Samuel Rhodes became the quartet’s violinist, where—upon the whole feel of a Juilliard performance, up until then taut, brilliant and electric, took on a sensuous depth, extra layers of sound and meaning, new interpretive dimensions.

I was fully primed by the time I met my first Juilliard Quartet member in 1984—it was Joel Krosnick, who coached my group in Haydn’s “Emperor” at Charles Castleman’s quartet program. I also had Joel as a coach in two different groups at Tanglewood in 1987, and he was an unforgettable inspiration of energy and insight. He never spoke down from on high; the sense was that rather he was pulling us up to his level and inviting us to share his enlightened point of view, in a spirit of excitement and companionship. I first played for Sam Rhodes around the same time, and was later to become his graduate student at Juilliard. Sam’s gift to me was the example of his artistic commitment, of an eminent performer whose love of the music he plays is as fresh as a fifteen-year-old’s.

In 1989 my student quartet had the opportunity to coach with Robert Mann on Bartók’s Sixth Quartet, a session that we anticipated with some trepidation, as Mann’s fierce reputation preceded him—after all, this was THE Robert Mann, who had been the Juilliard Quartet’s leader since our parents were small children. It turned out to be a magical experience, one shared by many student groups over the years, where Mr. Mann, almost by just singing with us, seemed to raise the bar of our performance. Now I am with the Brentano Quartet, and since every one of us has been a private student of a Juilliard quartet member, many people wonder if we see ourselves as that quartet’s “descendant.” In fact, there can be no genetic code handed down from one group to another, and I suspect we make a radically different interpretive impression in a performance. But in countless ways, in their playing and in their attitude, conscious and subliminal, these loving teachers have entered into our musical bloodstream.
When the Juilliard and I started to work together on the piece, all the things I had seen and admired from afar, I then saw up close. Each one had something to add, and the way they played off of one another in shaping the music was very interesting to me. Except for Joel Smirnoff, they were not comfortable improvising—how open they are to different ways of playing and different interpretations. Of all the groups I have played with, they are the freest and most open. We’re very close, because our approach is to find the essence of the music—it’s for the music—for the piece itself—that we play. I also love their great spontaneity in actual performance. We rehearse and rehearse and rehearse—and the performance can be totally different in a wonderful way. We don’t try to etch things in stone. The rehearsals are there so that we can come to an understanding of what the piece is all about, but the performance really has to do with that sense of openness and experiment and the improvisatory nature of performance. I felt that from the very first time, and I feel exactly the same way today.

Composer, pianist, and educator Billy Taylor received CMA’s Richard J. Bogwomoiny Award in 2005. He is the artistic advisor for jazz at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
Among Tanglewood diehards, the JSQ is known as the Joel-Iards, because of the two Joels. Joel Krosnick has for many years played a wonderful role as a teacher and chamber music coach at the Tanglewood Music Center, the Boston Symphony’s summer academy for up-and-coming young musicians. The other Joel is Smirnoff, a BSO violinist for a memorable seven years. As a BSO staff member, admirer, and friend of the latter Joel, I watched with mixed emotions as he auditioned for the quartet in 1986 and then left the orchestra to join the illustrious ensemble as second violinist. As it turned out, he was following in the footsteps of the quartet’s original violist, Raphael Hillyer, who—forty years earlier—had left the Boston Symphony to join the illustrious ensemble as second violinist.

But that’s not the only JSQ/BSO/Tanglewood connection. Eugene Lehner, yet another BSO violinist, was in many ways the éminence grise for the original JSQ. As a member of the Kolisch Quartet, Lehner gave the first performances of many of the most important string quartets composed in the first half of the 20th century, including those by Schoenberg and Bartók. As a member of the BSO—which he joined in 1939 at the invitation of Serge Koussevitzky—he inspired Robert Mann and the JSQ, Robert Mann gave his final performance with the quartet at Tanglewood on a warm July day in 1987. One month later, Tanglewood hosted the first performance of the “new” quartet, with Joel Smirnoff now as first and Ronald Copes as second violist.

Happily, for more than thirty years violist Sam Rhodes has come down from his perch at Marlboro to join the other three, so that this warm relationship between Tanglewood and the Juilliard continues, with the quartet performing and teaching there nearly every summer.

Dan Gustin, director of the Gilmore International Keyboard Festival & Awards, is vice president of Chamber Music America’s board of directors. From 1984 to 1997, he was assistant managing director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the manager of Tanglewood.

Andrew L. Pincus is classical music critic of The Berkshire Eagle and author of Musicians with a Mission: Keeping the Classical Tradition Alive and other books.

When I think of the Juilliard String Quartet, I think first of the Bartók quartets. As a college student I was simultaneously fascinated and mystified by the Juilliard’s path-breaking 1949 LPs of the Bartók cycle in the United States. I just knew that this music, in these impassioned performances, spoke of important things in a 20th-century language. Much later in life, I became a music critic and had many occasions to hear the Juilliard in both standard and new repertoire. I especially recall Bobby Mann’s 1997 farewell concert at Tanglewood, a powerfully emotional affair that ended his tenure as the last founding member of the ensemble. The program was a typically meaty one, chosen by Mann himself for the occasion: Beethoven’s Opus 132 followed by Opus 130 and, as an encore, the Lento from Opus 135. No gentle swan song here.

Not long after that, I began work on a book that featured the Juilliard, with a picture of the reconfigured ensemble on the cover. During my interviews with past and present members (but not with Mann, who was saving his stories for his memoirs), I got to know the Juilliard from the inside. This only increased my admiration for its 100 percent commitment to everything it did, whether new music or old. When the Juilliard made the Bartók cycle the centerpiece of its 60th-anniversary celebrations last year, the quartets I heard were burnished and deepened beyond those in the 1949 recordings. Bartók was unmistakably a successor to Beethoven and Brahms in the great string-quartet tradition, and I was the richer for it.

Andrew L. Pincus is classical music critic of The Berkshire Eagle and author of Musicians with a Mission: Keeping the Classical Tradition Alive and other books.

Checchia is artistic director of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society and administrator of the Marlboro School and Festival.

I first got to know the Juilliard Quartet because I knew Sam Rhodes, who spent several summers as a youngster with us at the Marlboro School and Festival in Vermont. I got to know the others quite well through many experiences, but especially because my wife [the soprano Benita Valente] appeared with them many times, premiering and recording works for string quartet and voice by Ginastera, Harbison and Wernick.

Later on, the Juilliard became one of the seminal groups that helped to establish and develop the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. The quartet has appeared on our series during each of the 22 years of our existence. PCMS having now grown to 63 concerts per season, I wonder where we would have been without them and their willingness to help us get started in those early years.

If I had to choose a word to describe the quartet, that word would be “integrity.” They have a willingness to explore new horizons, while at the same time affirming the importance of past masterpieces. That has been the credo by which the Juilliard has lived. Their contribution to the music world over these many years has been enormous!