

THE TIMES

Pacifica Quartet: Wigmore Hall

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Known principally for dispatching Elliott Carter's knotty quartets in a single concert, the Pacifica Quartet of Illinois have many other claims to distinction. They play with clarity, perfect togetherness and the finest of tuning. First violinist Simin Ganatra specialises in rapturous purity, the tone stripped of vibrato. Cellist Brandon Vamos's bowing arm is worthy of Hercules. Masumi Per Rostad, the violist, uses a bow with black hair — a kind less liable to snap, he says. They are all superb musicians. This was the third instalment of their Shostakovich cycle at Wigmore Hall, and their subtleties of gesture, phrasing and texture were immense.

Not that there was anything supine or sentimental: in the anguished and masterly Eighth Quartet of 1960, the musicians led us straight to its central paradox. Here's a piece larded with self-quotations and the composer's four-note motto, DSCH; yet it's music of emptiness and loss. Urged on by Ganatra's lamenting violin, the Pacificas played with dark intensity, superbly sustained. It was gripping.

With their crystalline textures and smooth attack, they triumphed too in the slighter, though equally personal, Seventh Quartet. So tight, indeed, was their ensemble, so beautiful their colours, that it came as a shock when a piano arrived for Shostakovich's 1940 Piano Quintet. The 87-year-old Menahem Pressler, veteran of the Beaux Arts Trio, is always welcome, but if a composer fails to integrate the piano properly, no pianist can do it for him. Sometimes blunt, sometimes sparkling, Pressler's notes appeared as a separate layer, like coping stones topping a wall. However, the encore — the andante from Brahms' Piano Quintet — made handsome amends, with dappled interplay between all instruments; throbbing emotion, too. Pressler was awarded the prestigious Wigmore Medal and spoke touchingly about music as the soul and centre of his life. The Pacifica Quartet, still youthful, looked on and beamed.