

Mann makes magic in Juilliard finale

By Richard Dyer
GLOBE STAFF

Performances by the Juilliard Quartet always end the same way. The exertion and involvement of the performers have been total; oblivious to the applause, they take a moment or two to catch their breath and return to planet Earth. Then the first violinist Robert Mann takes off his glasses and smiles, as if he's happy to see everyone who has unexpectedly crashed into his musical world.

Wednesday night at Tanglewood the gesture took on unusual poignancy because Mann was playing his final concert with the great ensemble he cofounded 51 years ago. Through most of that half-century and more, the Juilliard Quartet has stood as one of the definitive American musical institutions, and Mann has become one of the country's most admired and deeply loved musicians. Through and with the quartet Mann created a new, distinctive, highly adaptable, and assimilative style of chamber-music playing. It's one that is paradigmatically American in its paradoxical combination of respect for tradition and independence of mind, its vigor, brashness, and fullness of heart. The quartet's commitment to new and challenging music — Bartok and Schonberg in its early years, Carter in the middle period, and some of the diverse composers of today — has paid rich rewards. The Juilliard has ushered more than 500 new works into the world, and some of them have become part of the permanent repertory. This same activity has enlivened the quartet's playing of the traditional repertory; the Juilliard Quartet plays Beethoven as new music.

Of course, it is absurd to think of Mann as "retiring." He has always been an active composer, and plans to write more music. He has been an inspirational teacher — Mann and the Juilliard have mentored many of the world's leading younger quartets — and he will continue to do that. He also will continue to explore and perform solo literature and presumably other chamber music.

Mann may not be leaving the quartet too early, but he also is not leaving it too late. He's handled his retirement with the same intelligence and dignity that have characterized everything else he's ever

JUILLIARD STRING QUARTET
At: Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood,
Wednesday night

done; he certainly played a role in picking and enlarging the horizons of his successor, Joel Smirnoff, who has played second violin since 1986. Mann's valedictory Sony CD, of the Beethoven Quartet, Op. 130, with the Grosse Fuge, is glorious, and so was his playing in the emotionally charged performances of the same piece, and the A-Minor Quartet, Op. 132, on Wednesday.

The occasion brought out a distinguished audience of musicians, including one of the four living former members of the Juilliard, violist Raphael Hilyer. The playing was transcendent — full of quest to the very end, the excitement of discovery, slash-and-burn, and humanitarian impulse. Smirnoff, violist Samuel Rhodes, and Joel Krosnick played with all the individuality Mann has always encouraged, but also with shared vision and common impulse. Mann's long fingers were amazingly agile and accurate, his bow arm as flexible as a great singer's throat. His playing was notable for detail, integration of detail into line, supple and ongoing rhythm, profound knowledge and intuition, and, as always, a lively sense of adventure. The Cavatina in Op. 130 reached a rapturous point of distilled emotional purity and intensity; the Grosse Fuge was an explosion of energy.

The applause was tremendous, and the other members of the quartet stepped back and joined the audience in paying tribute. Mann's wife, Lucie, came forward and pinned a flower in his lapel. Rhodes made a presentation of written tributes from the quartet and a history and chronology.

Mann said he wanted to play "one more movement" in tribute to the beautiful girl who has lived with him for the last 50 years, his wife, and so the quartet played the Lento assai from Beethoven's Op. 135, which also entered the realm that lies beyond music, but which music reveals to us, the things that music is about.

There was a long silence, then Mann leaned forward, took off his glasses, and it was all over except for the shouting.