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At Columbia, Midday Barber in Strings and Song

By Anthony Tommasini

The fourth season of Columbia University's Lunchtime Concerts opened on Monday with the gifted Voxare String Quartet playing Barber's String Quartet. Just that. The idea behind this series could not be more simple or more inspired.

The programs are free, informal and short, lasting from 30 minutes to an hour at most. Only one work is presented, not as a concession to short attention spans but as an invitation to the audience to take a break at lunchtime, settle down and really listen. Jointly presented by the Miller Theater and Columbia's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the concerts take place in a comfortable reading room at Philosophy Hall. With people nestled into rows of folding chairs and standing against the walls, about 200 can be squeezed in.

Earlier seasons explored quartets by Beethoven and Haydn, solo violin and solo keyboard works by Bach, and more. This season, as Melissa Smey, the director of the Miller Theater, told the audience, the series will focus on "four of the founding fathers" of American music — Barber, Copland, Ives and Thomson — offering various works for voice, strings and piano.

In addition to the Voxare performance on Monday, I also caught the second of the three programs in the Barber survey on Tuesday. **It offered the soprano Sarah Wolfson and the pianist Lydia Brown in a glowing account of "Hermit Songs,"** a cycle written in the early 1950s for Leontyne Price, who recorded the songs with Barber at the piano for RCA.

Columbia was a hotbed of American music in the middle decades of the 20th century, as Ms. Smey told the audience. Among the works that had their first performances at Columbia were Barber's ballet "Medea," with choreography by Martha Graham; Copland's "12 Poems of Emily Dickinson"; Thomson's opera "The Mother of Us All"; and Ives's "Unanswered Question."

For many concertgoers hearing the 1936 Barber quartet is at once a familiar and an unfamiliar experience. In its version for string orchestra, the second movement, [the Adagio](#), is among the world's most famous classical works: the music of choice to commemorate tragic national anniversaries. Yet, curiously, the three-movement quartet does not turn up that often.

Though essentially tonal, this early Barber score is harmonically inventive and structurally daring. The impassioned first movement is concise and elusive, with an assertive main theme played in unison followed in short order by a contrasting choralelike theme of hazy, unsettled chords. The finale is agitated and inexorable.

In its original version, the famous Adagio emerges as intimate, poignant and achingly direct, especially as played here by the Voxare Quartet with such penetrating tone and lucid textures. These four young musicians — Emily Ondracek-Peterson and Galina Zhdanova, violinists; Erik Peterson, violist; and Adrian Daurov, cellist — were students at the Juilliard School when they formed the quartet in 2008, and it is rising fast.

In his "Hermit Songs" Barber, who loved Gaelic literature and was drawn to the subject of hermitage, choose texts by Irish monks and scholars from the 8th through the 13th centuries, some of them just jottings in the margins of scholarly books. A university reading room was an ideal place to hear the work: both songs like "The Crucifixion," a contemplation on the sacrifice of Jesus, and "The Monk and His Cat," a charming tribute by a monk to the solitary life he shares with Pangur, his white mouse-hunting cat.

Ms. Wolfson sang with luminous sound and impressively focused high notes. A keenly intelligent artist, she projected the words about as clearly as was possible in this small, acoustically resonant room. Ms. Brown played the elaborate piano accompaniments beautifully. Both studied at Juilliard, which seems to be establishing an outpost at Columbia for this series.

