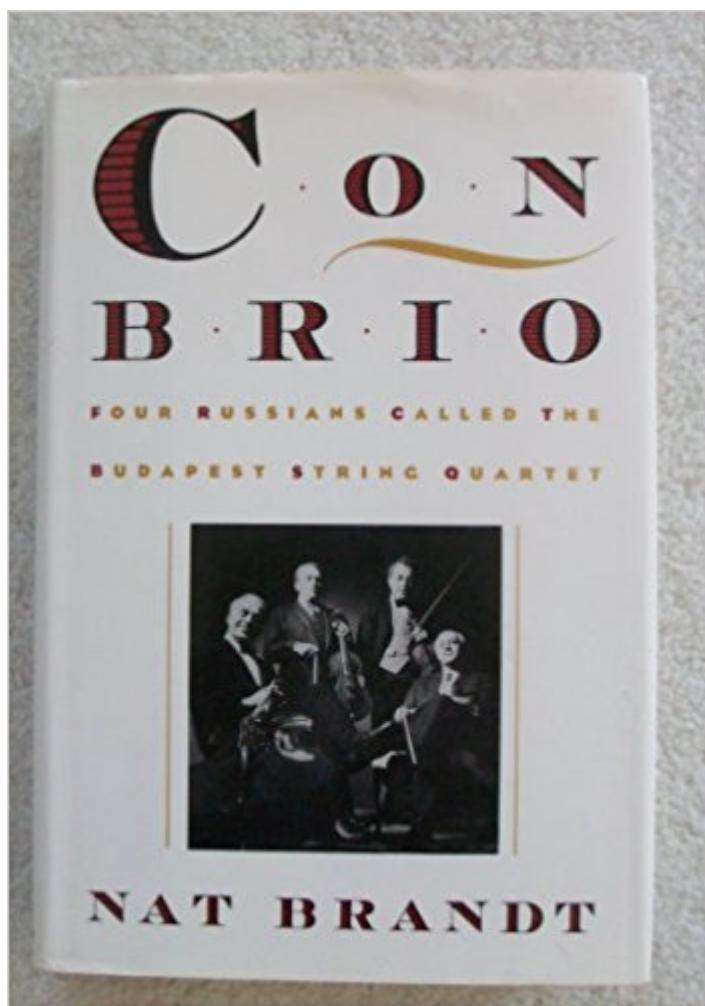


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Con Brio: Four Russians Called The Budapest String Quartet



Synopsis

Meet the Budapest String Quartet, captured here in a 1959 *New Yorker* profile that exemplified not only the way they handled stress, but the way they handled their life and music: "Sasha leaped from his chair and with violin held aloft, played the passage with exaggerated schmalz, like a street fiddler in Naples. Kroyt...stopped playing and started singing a Russian song...Mischa Schneider thereupon performed a number of stupendous triads on his cello...Only Roisman went quietly on with his part, untouched by the pandemonium around him, playing Beethoven with his noble tone and elegant bowing." Here were four men with personalities as varied as their ways of playing. Yet when they played, they produced a perfect union of instrumental voices and interpretive nuances that not only created an entirely new audience for chamber music in America, but made the Budapest String Quartet the premier chamber music group of the twentieth century. In *Con Brio*, Nat Brandt tells the fascinating story of the Budapest Quartet, from its founding in 1917 (when its members were 3 Hungarians and one Dutchman) to the trials and triumphs of its core members, the four Russian Jews--Joseph Roisman, Alexander (Sasha) Schneider, Mischa Schneider, and Boris Kroyt--who brought the Quartet to worldwide fame. We are there on the chilling night in 1934 when Nazi soldiers go backstage to congratulate four 'Hungarians' on their outstanding performance. That night, realizing that the Budapest name would not protect them forever, the four decide to leave Nazi Germany, never to return. We follow them to America, where they become the country's first quartet-in-residence at the Library of Congress, where they record the Mozart quintet with guest clarinetist, the King of Swing himself, Benny Goodman, and where, in 1957, they become the first chamber music ensemble to appear on television, bringing Debussy, Dvorak, and the Beethoven E minor into the homes of hundreds of thousands of spellbound viewers. Here too is a personal glimpse of the Quartet: in rehearsal, shouting at each other in Russian and German, bows in hands like rapiers, to make a point in their arguments before they decide matters by a vote; in their hotel rooms, obsessively playing bridge to relieve the stress of a rigorous concert schedule; in concert, abruptly stopping in the middle of a piece because an audience has become noisy; and at home, spending time with their family and friends. As Sasha Schneider recalls, "It is much easier to be married to one person than to be married to a string quartet." Said Jascha Heifetz, "One Russian is an anarchist; two Russians is a chess game; three Russians are a revolution; four Russians are the Budapest String Quartet." And in these pages we experience the passion for music and life of four Russians--Joe, Sasha, Mischa, and Boris--whose playing seduced the entire world and created a musical legacy--of a unity of sound and uniqueness of interpretation--for generations of musicians to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A relaxed and engaging portrait of the incomparable chamber- music ensemble (1917-67) and its four most important principals, gracefully interwoven into a history of string-quartet playing in America. Brandt (The Congressman Who Got Away with Murder, 1991, etc.) was connected to the famed Budapest String Quartet during its headiest days: His father-in-law was the violist Boris Kroyt. Brandt's affection for the men who shaped the group's intimately communicative style (Joseph Roisman, first violin; Alexander ("Sasha") Schneider, second violin; Kroyt; and Mischa Schneider, cello) never constrains his acute observations on the often difficult temperaments of four virtuosi who sublimated their own egos to achieve previously unattained artistic unity. Russian and Polish Jews, Roisman and company fled Hitler's Europe for an uncertain future in America, where chamber music was among the last forms of serious music-making to be accepted. Extraordinary talent prevailed, however, and the Budapest became quartet-in-residence at the Library of Congress, giving an annual series of sold-out (and widely broadcast) recitals using Stradivarius instruments donated to the Library by a wealthy patroness. Among other fascinating sidelights, Brandt illuminates the democratic decision-making procedures the group employed to achieve a concert of musical vision: Contested points of interpretation were put to a vote, with any tie broken by "the composer's vote" (cast by the instrumentalist whose predecessor had, with respect to the particular piece in question, won a match-stick drawing and whose initials had been noted on the first page of the score). This neatly written volume appears following Sony's CD rerelease of the early

Beethoven quartets recorded in 1951-52 by the same personnel (with the exception of Jacob Gorodetsky for Sasha Schneider). Reading the book while listening to the recording reinforces the impression of the Budapest's unanimity of cultural background and creative idealism. As the world that shaped this paragon fades, the legacy remains, thanks to modern technology and this sympathetic record. (Valuable discography and 26 halftones) -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

"Mr. Brandt is the late Boris Kroyt's son-in-law, and his portrait of the group is affectionate, though by no means invariably flattering....The book is essentially a straightforward history of the Budapest, based on interviews and correspondence, and anchored by character profiles. Mr. Brandt's description of the group dynamics, based on intimate personal knowledge of the individuals, is especially vivid."--The New York Times Book Review "[A] diverting contribution to American musical history....The Budapest's performances immediately thrilled American critics, and over the decades their playing expanded the audience for chamber music in this country and inspired a younger generation of American chamber players."--The New Yorker "Brandt (whose father-in-law was Boris Kroyt, the Budapest violist) has done an excellent job of limning the complex history of this most celebrated of all string quartets....Affectionate as well as scholarly, full of lively anecdote, and placing the Budapesters firmly in their cultural context."--Publishers Weekly "A relaxed and engaging portrait of the incomparable chamber-music ensemble and its four most important principals, gracefully interwoven into a history of string-quartet playing in America....As the world that shaped this paragon fades, the legacy remains, thanks to modern technology and this sympathetic record."--Kirkus Reviews "A feast for every music lover."--Joseph Machlis

I purchased this book in late January of 2013 (originally published in 1993), but finally got down to reading it this past week. A well-written story of the musicians that made of the Budapest String Quartet. We get insight, opinions along with overall knowledge on what made these people tick (individually, and as a unit). We also get to know others that were in front of (and behind the scenes) in that phenomenon that was to be...American Chamber Music. Truly musical history in the making! That said, It appears that Nat Brandt did a good job of research on putting this book together (judging by the many references/notes contained therein). Mr. Brandt packed a lot of information into 203 pages! Great job (and a great read)! Recommended! I rate "Con Brio: Four Russians Called the Budapest String Quartet" ...Five stars!

Excellent account of one of the (if not THE) greatest Chamber ensembles of the 20th century!

I was surprised by the books condition as it was perfect. The book was as good as new. I was extremely pleased and will continue to make similar purchases. Austin Hyde

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