



Con Brio: Four Russians Called the Budapest String Quartet

Nat Brandt

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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.

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