

Grand Finales for the Emerson Quartet, on Stage and CD

By John Rockwell, *Musical America*

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After 47 years and thousands of concerts worldwide, playing nearly 300 compositions and recording most of them, the Emerson String Quartet has called it quits.

Actually, they called it quits twice. Most immediately with the second of two consecutive concerts at Alice Tully Hall late yesterday afternoon (Oct. 22). But secondarily with a final CD released last month called *Infinite Voyage*. The title suggests that the Emersons aren't really bidding us farewell, since their music-making will live on infinitely via their recordings.

The packed hall erupted in cheers and a standing ovation before the foursome—Eugene Drucker and Philip Seltzer, the two founding members in 1976 back at the Juilliard School who alternate first and second violins, plus Lawrence Dutton, viola, and Paul Watkins, cello—first walked on stage, with comparable ovations before the second half and, of course, at the end.

The two farewells could hardly have been more different, deliberately so. The CD—on the Franco-Belgian Alpha Classics label, their third after their longstanding alliance with Deutsche Grammophon—has music by Hindemith, Berg, Chausson, and Schoenberg.

That selection attests to the quartet's omnivorous repertory over the years, from the mid-18th century to our own, eschewing earlier music and up to the modernists, European and American. No post-modernists, let alone minimalists, but pretty much everything in between.



On stage, October 22: Eugene Drucker, Philip Seltzer, Paul Watkins, Lawrence Dutton

The Tully Hall program stuck to two peaks of Germanic early Romanticism, signature works for the Emersons over the years, composed in 1825 and 1828, just before their composers' deaths. First came Beethoven's Quartet in B flat, Op. 130, with its heavenly Cavatina and monumental Grosse Fuge at the end.

After the intermission there was Schubert's Quintet in C. D. 956, for quartet plus a second cello, the one with its equally heavenly Adagio, music that Arthur Rubinstein and Thomas Mann chose to hear as they died.

For the Schubert, the four were joined by David Finckel, cellist and quartet member from 1979 to 2013. There was symbolism here: Finckel's final Emerson performance and Watkins's first was in this same quintet; the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln, of which Finckel is co-artistic director, presented these concerts and gave the quartet an onstage proclamation before the Schubert.

The performances on Sunday were fiery, commanding, almost aggressive (both clocked in under the time indicated in the program). The Emersons were modern musicians; no wallowing or swooning portamentos for them. Yet the quieter music elicited a winning sweetness of tone.

The two towering scores complemented each other. The Beethoven, especially in the 15-minute Grosse Fuge, has a forward-looking modernity; one hears why it puzzled and disturbed listeners 200 years ago; they thought the deaf composer had gone mad. Schubert, for all his innovations, almost seemed to look back to the comforts of classicism. Though who knows how he would have evolved had he not died at 31.

The *Infinite Voyage* CD includes another longtime collaborator in soprano Barbara Hannigan, who sounds in particularly sweet and sure voice, along with her typical accuracy and musicality. She sings in three of the four pieces: Hindemith's haunting "Melancholie," remembering a friend killed in World War I; Chausson's quasi-Wagnerian "Chanson perpétuelle," joined by pianist Bertrand Chamayou; and Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2 in F sharp minor, Op. 10. In between comes Berg's String Quartet No. 3, composed under Schoenberg's tutelage but already strongly individual. This is all compelling, bracing music, with performances to match.



The playing here and at the Sunday concert proved that the Emersons are saying farewell at the height of their powers. There have been other great string quartets in the recording era, with their own special virtues. But for influence and renown, none surpassed the Emersons.

And beyond their huge discography, they are not disappearing, individually or collectively. Each plans to continue to teach and to mentor the next generation of string quartets. Their legacy will last far into the future.

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