NORMAN FISCHER

When Robert Mann received the honorary doctorate from Oberlin College in 1991, he was called the Father of American Chamber Music. A man who was a revolutionary in his time, who wound up defining a style of quartet playing known immediately as "American" (similar to the way Copland's music is known as American). He and the Juilliard Quartet were famous for treating new scores as if they were old masterworks and the masterworks as new music. The Juilliards made the chamber music audiences understand that Bartók, Schoenberg and Carter are our expanding repertoire staples. The generations of string quartets that have been launched under the watchful eye of Mann are legion, as well as his students who are teaching themselves. And in that way the American chamber music field is continuing to define itself according to the bold vision of Robert Mann.

No less important is the heroic work that Bobby and Lucy have done for the Naumburg Foundation and the generations of artists whose lives have been changed by this awesome stewardship. Winning the competition is only the beginning of a long, close relationship that they have with their artists, and that includes the composers as well as the performers.

I consider myself so fortunate to be born at a time that I could have the influence of Robert Mann in my life. First it was the SOUND (still the most beautiful violin sound I can imagine). As a teenager and already a chamber music nut I heard Mendelssohn op. 44, no. 1 on the radio with the Juilliard playing and I couldn't get over the sound and excitement of it. Then there was the set of the Bartók Quartets that I wore out from playing in the mid-'60s. I was listening and learning more about that sound, and wrote to Mr. Mann asking if my Oberlin student quartet could study with him at Aspen (I still treasure the postcard he wrote back). Hearing the Juilliards live for the first time (in Sam Rhodes' first summer and Berg Lyric Suite the work), I understood that Robert Mann and his sound were no ordinary thing. Later when Mark Sokol and I first played together before forming the Concord Quartet I recognized in his sound that he understood the importance of that sound and that aesthetic. After helping the four of us find each other to make the Concord Quartet, Robert Mann coached us and helped us define ourselves by provoking our voice leading and personal counterpoint, moving ever closer to the "human" inside the music. Of course, the Concords had their life-changing moment as recipients of the 1972 Naumburg Award and the loving attentions of Mr. Mann and Lucy in this regard. Then there was the thrill I had sitting next to "that sound" when Bobby joined us in our 10th anniversary Tully Hall season playing viola II in Brahms op. 111, our playing together the Mendelssohn Octet with eight Strads at the Library of Congress, and my joining the Juilliards as guest cellist in the Schubert Quintet at Tanglewood. Most recently I had another great thrill in 2007 having the opportunity to play with Bobby the Mozart G Minor Quintet, just to be making music with him and to feel directly that undeniably huge life force that is Bobby. (I am also personally fortunate to share this legacy with my daughter Becca, first violinist of the Chiara Quartet, who coached frequently with Bobby at Juilliard.)

Thank you, Bobby and Lucy, from the depth of my being, for your humanity, generosity and vision. Thank you also for being the role models showing us what it means to be dedicated to that vision and seeing it through. I am so immensely grateful to you.

