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Strings Attached

Stanford's resident ensemble, onstage and off.



Courtesy St. Lawrence String Quartet

FAB FOUR: Shiffman, Robertson, Nuttall and Costanza give 150 concerts a year.

By Eva Ciabattoni

Elegant. Savage. Brilliant. Warm. Precise. Fearless. Trying to portray the St. Lawrence String Quartet, music critics only hint at the shape of the real thing. Stanford's ensemble-in-residence maintains an annual touring schedule of more than 100 concerts, but since 1998 they also have made the Farm their base to collaborate, educate and inspire (see sidebar). To get a fuller look at their work, we followed them through a typical month.

On-campus performance, Dinkelspiel: Haydn's *Opus 64, No. 2* and Dvorak's *Opus 61* are classical bookends around this concert's modern middle, Canadian composer R. Murray Shafer's *Quartet No. 3*. The second movement of the Shafer invariably startles, with its frenetic playing and scripted Inuit shouts ("*daba, daba, daba, dzhu! dzhu!*"), before it dissolves into the mystical third movement. Shafer's piece starts with a cello solo by Chris Costanza, then violist Lesley Robertson joins in offstage and violinists Geoff Nuttall and Barry Shiffman enter,

playing, from the auditorium's back entrances.

For those who don't consider modern chamber music conducive to romance, it's worth noting that the seven minutes second violinist Shiffman spent in the lobby awaiting his cue each night during a four-night run in Vancouver gave him enough time to work up the nerve to meet his future wife, who was working for the concert promoter.

The quartet strives for fidelity to a score and the composer's intentions, playing music from the inside out. It chooses living composers for 20 to 30 percent of its repertoire, including works by Shafer, Osvaldo Golijov and Stanford professors Jonathan Berger and Mark Applebaum. "Being able to collaborate is invaluable," explains Shiffman. "Even a score bristling with notation can fail to divulge a composer's true aim." Preparing for the premiere of Golijov's *Yiddishbuk* at Tanglewood Music Festival in 1992, they asked the composer to sing what he heard in his imagination. His scream-cry-prayer clued them in instantly. So began an enduring friendship and the path toward a Grammy nomination.

The quartet teamed with Berger on a performance of *Eli Eli* in memory of Daniel Pearl, '85, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter abducted and killed in Pakistan in 2002. "When they play Haydn, you think they play nothing but Haydn," Berger says. "But they bring that same commitment and love to everything they play. There is nothing more rewarding to a composer."

University of Kansas, Lawrence: Dead-eyed protesters from a Topeka church await the quartet outside their concert venue, holding crudely painted banners emblazoned with swastikas and slogans. The protest centers on the group's Canadian origins and the news that Canada will allow gay marriage. Unruffled, the musicians pose for pictures alongside the demonstrators.

Walter Hall, University of Toronto: This is the world premiere of Applebaum's *20*, an eclectic composition dedicated to his wife of nearly 20 years. A rave review in the *Toronto Star* calls the interpretation dazzling, and first violinist Geoff Nuttall dashing, a nod to his highly physical style—a quartet trademark.

Applebaum composed *20* specifically for the quartet. "Every note that went on the page, every sound that I heard in my head, every physical gesture that I imagined the players making—these were all informed by my understanding of and friendship with the group," he says.

Shiffman and Nuttall met at Toronto as music students and formed the quartet in 1989 with violist Robertson and cellist Marina Hoover. Costanza succeeded Hoover last year. He plays a cello from Stanford's Harry R. Lange collection that lends a warm, dark bass and woody resonance to his voice in the ensemble. "The Emerson Quartet's mentoring helped us get bookings during the first half of our career," Nuttall says. "Having a full schedule has been key to being stable for

15 years. We might argue one day and the next day it's forgotten as we prepare for an upcoming concert.”

Dormitory concert, Wilbur Hall: The smell of french fries, hamburgers and ketchup hangs like a fog in the living room, where several dozen students fill the sofas or sit on the floor bent over trays of food. Clad in jeans, the musicians are poised like sprinters awaiting the starting gun—Nuttall's gesture and inhalation—before plunging into Ravel's only string quartet. They finish with bows raised in unison. A student asks if the quality of their playing depends on the audience; Nuttall says their level of performance remains the same whether it's Wilbur Hall or Carnegie Hall.

A question about concert etiquette pops up, and Nuttall explains that the convention of holding applause until the end of a piece is only 50 years old. Robertson likens clapping in the middle of an opus to hollering “amen” during a church service—whether it's appropriate depends on context. A somber or introspective passage requires a pregnant silence leading into the next movement, whereas boisterous movements beg for joyous expression.

On-campus afternoon: Nuttall, Shiffman and Costanza stroll across campus to Professor John Felstiner's class, *Imagining the Holocaust*. They will perform the slow movement of Gideon Klein's *String Trio*, written at the Theresienstadt concentration camp shortly before the young composer's death. Nuttall plays the Moravian folk song on which *Trio* is based, so students can listen for the way the melody repeats and transforms. Felstiner explains that the playing of two strings simultaneously on the one violin (known as double stops) is to compensate for the loss of the original second violinist to an Auschwitz transport.

The three hurry back to Dinkelspiel to play for a group of schoolchildren. Later, back at Braun, Shiffman stops at his mailbox to retrieve Berger's newest score, *Doubles*, premiering in June at Bard College. Students mill around the second floor waiting for lessons; each member of the quartet teaches three students privately. They also coach several chamber ensembles.

Lively Arts Concert, Memorial Auditorium: World-famous violinist Joshua Bell and pianist Simon Mulligan play to a full house. They team with the quartet for Chausson's *Opus 21*, Concerto in D for Piano, Violin and String Quartet.

Shiffman also has arranged for the violinist to play with 15 Stanford Chamber Strings students. In a format that is more jam session than master class, Bell tells students not to be afraid to have fun with Bach and “let it rip.” Before the Allegro, he deadpans, “I'll just say it right now—it needs to be faster.”

The University's critical mass of artistic resources has inspired a number of quartet collaborations. In January 2003, Lively Arts commissioned the quartet, the Pilobolus Dance Troupe and composer Chris Hatzis to create *My Brother's Keeper*. Lively Arts also provided the venue for the Chamber Strings students to play Golijov's dramatic *St. Mark Passion*. At Shiffman's suggestion, the Cantor Arts Center held an exhibition of old photographs of Jewish Eastern Europe last year, during which the quartet gave several performances.

School visits, Mill Valley: The Mill Valley Chamber Music Society has invited the quartet to visit three local schools. When one boy asks about the “owies” on their necks, the musicians explain that to keep in top performing shape, they practice together three to five hours daily, on top of individual practice. Robertson says that as a child, she never knew rebellion was an option. Viola practice was like brushing her teeth or eating broccoli: “You just did it.”

All four say they usually spend vacations mentoring conservatory students and playing music festivals like Spoleto or Tanglewood. They look appalled at the thought of lounging aimlessly on a beach—though Shiffman confesses he did go to Hawaii, once, without his violin. In fact, the quartet founded the Summer Chamber Institute at Stanford, where amateurs and students meet for hours of playing, coaching and listening to Nuttall's collection of rare LPs. Josh Klein, JD '02, a law clerk for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, '50, JD '52, studied with quartet members as a student and has attended the institute. “At the end of the week, you are playing at a level you never even knew you were capable of.”

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