

FINE,

# UPSTAR

It's not a huge uprising, but a number of ensembles—even string quartets—no longer sit in chairs when performing. What's it all about?

EMPIRE BRASS



# standing ENSEMBLES

Like most art forms, chamber music performance has evolved to reflect changes in society and technology. As instruments developed greater power to project, performances moved from small chambers to larger spaces, where professional musicians played to paying audiences. New instrumentations, such as the saxophone quartet and the percussion ensemble, emerged. By the late twentieth century, composers had recast what was once thought of as “intimate musical conversation” to incorporate abrasive electronically-produced sonorities. Some works called for musicians to wear headphones with click tracks, preventing them from hearing each other. Sometimes they couldn’t even hear themselves.

The latest trend in chamber music performance, by contrast, is distinctly low-tech but nonetheless high impact: playing standing up.

Well, it isn’t exactly new. Some established brass quintets—notably the Empire Brass—have stood for decades, as have early music groups, woodwind groups and, more recently, chamber orchestras. But string quartets, breaking centuries-old tradition, have recently joined their ranks. As such, the time seems ripe to consider the pros and cons of the—well, position.

## PROS

For many people, it’s simply more comfortable to play standing up. It’s how we’re taught to play and how we perform as soloists. Standing, it’s easier to establish good posture with the instrument.

Standing also allows freedom to express with the whole body. With arms, shoulders and waist liberated, a player’s range of motion expands. For wind players, there’s better air flow. The ability to turn the whole body makes it easier to communicate with other ensemble members and the audience. One arguably feels the rhythm of a piece better on one’s feet, and, perhaps unconsciously, produces a bigger, fatter sound.

In terms of acoustics, sound travels farther and with greater clarity when musicians stand. Why? Sound vibrations aren’t absorbed by the musician’s lap, clothing, and chair.

Standing, players are visually more stimulating. A player who looks fully engaged tends to elicit more engagement from an audience. The players want to bring the composer’s intentions to life, in a way, making a case for the piece. No speaker delivers a speech sitting down. Can you imagine a courtroom lawyer trying to convince a jury from a seated position?

by Judith Kogan

EMERSON STRING QUARTET



Some leading chamber ensembles have switched to standing almost by accident. (See “What Made Them Stand?” opposite page.) The Emerson String Quartet, which sat for more than twenty-five years, has stood for most of the last decade. The New York Woodwind Quintet, seated for most of six decades, has stood for virtually every performance since 2005, when one member stood in rehearsal to boost his energy. The avant-garde ensemble eighth blackbird first stood in a response to an Oberlin professor’s offhand suggestion about something else. Having tried and liked it, none of these groups has looked back.

#### EVEN BEFORE EMERSON

The New Zealand String Quartet, which preceded the Emerson Quartet to its feet, also arrived there accidentally. In 1995, the New Zealand ensemble was coaching a student group that was having trouble expressing the swing of a piece. One by one, the quartet members leapt onstage to try to get the students to move with the music. When one of the violinists pulled his student to his feet, the other violinist and violist did the same with their counterparts. Suddenly, the music came to life. The students played with freedom; the sound opened up. This led the coaches to reflect on their own conventional seating: At a private concert soon afterward, they tried performing standing and haven’t sat down since.



QNG—QUARTET NEW GENERATION

#### CONS

For some instrumentalists, of course, standing is physically impossible. Cellists, pianists and harpists need to sit. Standing in an ensemble that includes these instruments inevitably places the musicians at different planes relative to one another and to the floor. String quartets have solved the problem, as the New Zealand Quartet did, by placing the cellist on a podium that raises him closer to eye level with the violinists and violist. The cello podium becomes part of the quartet’s “travel kit” or is provided by presenters. The bulky original version used by the New Zealand Quartet had immov-

able bedlegs. The current one—portable, but still cumbersome—has foldable legs.

Pianists are not easily placed on podiums. And pianists, generally sitting behind the other instrumentalists and often (erroneously) thought of as accompanists, are further diminished by being the only player seated. Like the Emerson Quartet, most chamber ensembles that otherwise stand, sit when performing with piano.

Though some find standing up boosts their energy, stamina can be an issue—though generally not during a concert, while adrenaline flows. Some of the groups that stand to perform, sit to rehearse and record. And although certain back problems disappear when standing, others become more acute. Footwear needs to be considered. As Mary Persin, the Biava Quartet violist jokes, “Our heels are shrinking every year.” Stephen Pollock, of the New Century Saxophone Quartet says, “Concert over, I notice my feet may be sore. Back at the hotel, I want to get the shoes off pretty fast.”

Some instrumentalists rely on laps to anchor their instruments. Though violinists and violists might be pleased to lose the lap that can be an obstacle when playing on the E or A strings, horn players who stand need to learn a new way to keep an embouchure stable. Bassoonists, saxophonists and some clarinetists who stand learn to use straps.

#### BIAVA QUARTET





**BOREALIS WIND QUINTET**

The tuba player in the Empire Brass stands for short performances, but for a standard-length concert, sits on a straight-back chair, bell facing out. Even strapped to the body, the tuba is nearly impossible to hold for two hours.

Some think that standing is gimmicky, the added entertainment value upstaging the music. But standing doesn't necessarily imply wild movement. The Escher String Quartet stands in tight formation but moves little more, one journalist noted, than four unrelated people on an elevator. Their communication with one another is subtle, yielding a tightly woven blanket of sound. Some feel the appropriateness of standing depends on the repertoire. But in the season when the Emerson Quartet was pleased to play Haydn Quartets standing, violinist Eugene Drucker worried about standing to perform Beethoven's Razumovsky Quartets—"the quintessential quartet experience—intimate, with huge sonorities." He has decided it's just as valid.

#### ADVOCATES AND OTHERS

Violinist Daniel Heifetz, on a campaign to redefine the concert experience—"to bring the excitement back," he says—has made standing for performance a cornerstone of the program at New Hampshire's Heifetz International Music Institute. Students

# WHAT MADE THEM STAND?

**THE EMERSON STRING QUARTET** The confluence of three musical events around its 25th anniversary season (2001-2002) led the Emerson String Quartet to stand for virtually all its performances since.

1. The quartet performed Shostakovich's 15th String Quartet as part of *The Noise of Time*, a theater piece with four actors, film, choreography, taped readings and live music. The players stood for much of the work, at times separated by as much as thirty feet. The experience loosened up their notions of how a string quartet should be played.

2. Concerned that a scheduled concert in Alice Tully Hall of six Haydn string quartets would lack impact, the quartet was looking for new ideas. Cellist David Finckel suggested that since the first violin parts were soloistic, the first violin might consider standing. But since string quartets today are essentially democratic, both violinists and the violist stood; Finckel sat on a cello podium. Pianist Wu Han, listening from the hall, noted a marked improvement in projection.

3. In honor of the anniversary season, the Cleveland Orchestra commissioned Wolfgang Rihm to compose *Dithyrambe*, a concerto for string quartet and orchestra, to be performed in Cleveland, Boston, and Carnegie Hall. Concerned about projecting over the thick orchestral writing and since concerto soloists generally stand—and the season had served up other "standing" successes—the quartet performed the concerto standing up.

**THE NEW YORK WOODWIND QUINTET** The NYWQ, seated for almost six decades, started standing in 2005 and has stood for virtually every performance since. As member bassoonist Marc Goldberg tells it, "We are all extremely busy outside of the quintet, so the rehearsals start late and run long. At one rehearsal when our intensity was flagging, the oboist, Steve [Taylor] stood to help regain energy. We all followed suit. It was so remarkably better, we decided then and there to make it our performance practice."

**eighth blackbird** When the ensemble first got together at Oberlin in 1996, a professor suggested, half-jokingly, "Why don't you memorize this piece to take it to the next level?" Once the piece was memorized, says clarinetist Timothy Munro, "it seemed silly to be sitting in formation, stubbornly staring at non-existent music stands. So the decision was made to stand and engage visually with one another and the audience, and we haven't looked back!" Eighth blackbird has actually gone a step further: they sometimes walk while they perform.

**CALEFAX REED QUINTET**



are required to take a communication training course—classes in public speaking, movement and drama. At the Heifetz institute, even ensembles with piano stand. Even orchestras, Heifetz feels, should play standing.

Among orchestras that do is the Australian Chamber Orchestra, which, according to eighth blackbird's clarinetist Timothy Munro, breathes, moves and plays like a

world-class string quartet. "They are an inspiration in so many ways, but particularly in the way they engage an audience—from their designer outfits to the youthful exuberance of their thrilling interpretations to their dynamic profile onstage." He notes that their concerts are among the few classical events where gray hair doesn't predominate in the audience.

"Once the Emersons started the practice,

I suspect that most other quartets at least thought about it, especially younger ones," says Phillip Ying, the violist of the Ying Quartet, which decided to remain seated. The Ying Quartet doesn't feel that remaining seated diminishes its ability to communicate or be physically uninhibited, "so we stay that way, and things don't get complicated for our cellist." The Borromeo Quartet understands the advantages to standing, but hasn't

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**BROOKLYN RIDER**

**SOME ENSEMBLES THAT STAND**

<b>STRING QUARTETS</b>	<b>WINDS AND BRASS</b>	<b>CHAMBER ORCHESTRAS</b>
Emerson String Quartet	New York Woodwind Quintet	Sejong Soloists
Escher String Quarter	Borealis Wind Quintet	Australian Chamber Orchestra
Biava Quartet	Calefax Reed Quintet	A Far Cry
Artemis String Quartet	Vento Chiaro	Venice Baroque Orchestra
New Zealand String Quartet	New Century Saxophone Quartet	I Musici de Montreal
Carpe Diem String Quartet	Amstel Quartet	
Brooklyn Rider	Red Line Saxophone Quartet	<b>MIXED ENSEMBLES</b>
ETHEL	Capitol Quartet	eighth blackbird
	Empire Brass	
	QNG—Quartet New Generation	

## Fine, Upstanding Ensembles

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felt a desire to try it. “When the group is seated in a semicircle,” says first violinist Nicholas Kitchen, “there’s a certain plane of listening. There’s an instinctive reluctance to give that up.”

### ON BALANCE

Ideally, chamber musicians want to bring the audience into the intimate world of blended voices. But they also need to be practical. A string quartet might look and sound puny in the Hollywood Bowl. And younger and less sophisticated audiences, with music at their fingertips 24/7, are used to more buzz in a live concert. Whereas older groups might think more about bringing an audience into their world, some younger groups, raised in a media-saturated world, focus more on the total package they’re delivering.

ETHEL, a “post-classical” string quartet that refers to itself as a band, is among them. “Honestly, we feel that we play better when we stand,” says Cornelius Dufallo, its first violinist. “A large part of ETHEL’s mission is breaking with old conventions that we feel inhibit communication between performer and audience. Sitting while you play is one of them. Today’s jazz musicians often stand. Rock musicians almost always stand. Why must chamber musicians sit? It’s just an old tradition that performers sometimes forget to question.”



“When we coach chamber music groups,” says eighth blackbird’s Timothy Munro, “we find that not only do they sit, but they also take the business-meeting formation: all facing each other with no seeming interest in the audience. Chamber groups must think about how they can engage an audience. This shouldn’t just be a decision about whether to stand. More things have to be taken into account,” he says, including programming, concert dress, speaking from the stage, and interaction outside of the performance.

Without question, a stirring chamber music performance could be delivered either standing or sitting. Ditto, a ghastly one.

Whether to stand is only one of numerous factors that inform a performance. It’s also true that performers need to feel comfortable, but a routine may be stale. It can be useful to shake things up. Try a new configuration. Try playing from memory. Try playing in pitch dark. Each forces a new kind of listening and engagement. As Yuli Turovsky, the conductor of I Solisti de Montreal, a chamber orchestra that plays standing, says, “Think: Glenn Gould. The way he sat at the piano was ridiculous. He broke all the rules. But the way he presented music was incomparable.”

Try standing.



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