

Partners The Beaux Arts Trio recently celebrated its 50th anniversary; the Juilliard String Quartet, its 60th.

Compared with those milestones, the 40th season of the **Portland String Quartet** may seem like a relatively modest achievement. But the quartet, founded in 1969, has achieved something that sets it apart from those other venerable ensembles: it has survived all that time in its original configuration. Through four decades of performing, touring, teaching and recording, the original foursome—violinists Stephen Kecskemethy and Ronald Lantz, violist Julia Adams and cellist Paul Ross—are still together.

The four recently talked to *Chamber Music* about the secrets of their stability. Being in a chamber ensemble was paramount for each. “We had all played in orchestras before [we started], but we all knew we wanted to be in a string quartet,” says Ross. “We knew our first love was chamber music.”

Equally important, the musicians found compatibility without seeking unanimity. “We came from different backgrounds, from different parts of the country,” says Lantz. “We early on saw the strength of that. We’ve been able to use that strength, rather than anyone insisting on one way of doing things. I think it’s the willingness to accept the best way out of four...”

“...To always respect your colleagues,” Adams adds.

“Even when they’re wrong!” Ross says.

Maintaining a consensus means acting as a democracy, but one attuned to the nuances of group dynamics. “We don’t always agree on literature, but if three people feel strongly about a piece, and the fourth person doesn’t feel so strongly, that’s okay,” says Lantz. “But if he says, ‘This piece is just garbage!’—well, you can’t play like that. So everyone gets occasional veto power.”

“We’re willing to live with a problem—it doesn’t have to be solved today,” says Kecskemethy. “We let it get into our systems a bit, then come up with a decision. If we’re still split, we do it with a coin toss!”

As far back as 1981, the group’s untroubled mode of operation attracted the notice of the Harvard Business School, which embarked on a study of the PSQ as a “small business team.” A tape of the quartet in rehearsal became a teaching tool that some business professors use to this day. At Harvard, the PSQ was discussed as “a leaderless group”—a label the players



THE PORTLAND STRING QUARTET (ROSS, LANTZ, KECSKEMETHY AND ADAMS) IN 1975.



THE QUARTET TODAY

feel is misleading. “There is always a leader—just a different leader at different times,” says Lantz.

Needless to say, four decades of shared history have brought the four an immeasurable degree of personal closeness. Through marriages and divorces, family tragedies, illnesses, and the birth of children and grandchildren, the quartet has been a constant. “We have only one parent still surviving—we’ve lost the others,” says Kecskemethy. “We’ve also lost children of ours. We’ve lived through these things and shared them together. It’s something that bonds you. It goes beyond the music: it makes the whole thing a very human experience.”

www.portlandstringquartet.org

MARIA, ANGELLA, AND LUCIA AHN

Boundary Busters

The stylish crowd filling Manhattan's Highline Ballroom is predominantly Asian American and almost exclusively under 40. The club usually serves as a showcase for the likes of Lou Reed and Gnarl Barkley, but tonight the featured act is a chamber ensemble: the **Ahn Trio**—three sisters whose piano trio has engendered a following among audiences who may know no other classical performers.

The occasion is the release of the Ahns' new CD, *Lullaby for My Favorite Insomniac*, their first release on Sony BMG Masterworks and their most vigorous attempt yet to blur the demarcation between contemporary classical music and pop. "I have this kind of fantasy—I hope there comes a time when we don't have to spend so much energy talking about different genres, and different boxes and different places," says Angella Ahn in a separate conversation. She's the group's violinist and "*much younger*" (as she jokes in concert) sister of the twins Lucia (piano) and Maria (cello).

"I feel like eventually, there's going to be one category of good music and one of bad music," she says. "I think it's already happening. Music is lots of notes that are organized in certain ways. Whether it's folk or rock or bluegrass—it's all these *notes!*"

The Ahns' Highline set includes the album's hypnotic title track, a composition by their longtime collaborator and former Juilliard classmate Kenji Bunch. At one point, the sisters clear the stage for the hip hop musician DJ Spooky, who offers remixes of two of the albums' songs. The closing number is a Bunch's version of "My Funny Valentine"; midway through the piece, R&B singer Ra.D and rapper Sickboi take the stage with the trio. The convergence of the venerable standard,



Bunch's cool-jazz-meets-Brahms arrangement, and the thoroughly 21st-century manner of the guest vocalists makes a compelling argument for the universality of good music.

"We've always struggled with that idea of classical music *not* being for everyone," Angella says. "Why shouldn't it be? It's great music; it moves you to laughter and tears. A few hundred years ago, it was party music! We don't care if people clap in the wrong places—we *want* them to clap! It's all about enjoying and expressing and feeling." www.ahntrio.com

School Girl If not for the Detroit public school system, New York-based jazz violinist **Gwen Laster** might never have found a career in music. She was first introduced to the violin in group lessons in grammar school. Later, during her high school years, her teacher Anderson White encouraged her to build on her classical training and start improvising. “It was very embarrassing—I had never

done that before,” says Laster. But by taking that leap of faith, and creating improvisations to pieces like the Bach Double Violin Concerto, Laster slowly but surely gained the confidence to play jazz.

The support she got from her public schools carried over to her time at the University of Michigan. Throughout high school she had used a factory-made violin belonging to the school system; when she went on to college, White let her hang on to it. (Angel Reyes, her U. of M. violin teacher, once said to her: “You must really love music, because your violin sounds like a cigar box.”) It was only when she went on to grad school (also at Michigan) that she took out a student loan to get a proper instrument—and returned the factory-made instrument to the school system.

Laster now has a busy career as a performer, composer and arranger. She has recorded and released two of her own CDs, *Sneak Preview* and *I Can Hear You Smiling*, with a third scheduled for this fall. She plays in orchestras and string quartets, and works as a session musician with artists like Alicia Keys and Joss Stone. But, as if in acknowledgment of the role music education has played in her development, she devotes a significant portion of her

time to teaching young people. When she first moved to New York, she started a jazz strings program at the Harlem School for the Arts. Now she runs her own program, which she calls the Creative Strings Curriculum, in various New York-area schools. And this summer, she’ll run a six-day institute at Interlochen Arts Camp in which young string players will compose their own music and record it.

Just as she once learned to lose her inhibitions and start improvising, Laster now encourages her classically trained students to do the same. “I know that kids want to have something different to do,” she says. “Once they get to be 11 or 12, they get restless—they want to be involved in a different approach to the instrument. I know how exciting it is: It’s still exciting to me!” www.gwenlaster.com



American Ensemble

L TO R: PETER ROSENFELD, BASS [EMERITUS]; JUDD GREENSTEIN, COMPOSER;
ALEX SOPP, FLUTE; PATRICK BURKE, COMPOSER; SARA BUDDE, CLARINET;
MARK DANCIGERS, ELECTRIC GUITAR/COMPOSER; MICHAEL MIZRAHI, PIANO



Brave NOW World

“I don’t think we have any fidelity to history,” says Judd Greenstein. Coming from a member of a chamber music ensemble, it seems like a radical statement. But Greenstein is simply asserting the right of **NOW Ensemble**, his contemporary music collective, to forge its own path. The maverick impulse was there from the beginning—in 2002, when the group was in its fledgling stages at the Yale School of Music. “We were frustrated with the sounds of contemporary music out there,” says Greenstein. “We wanted to rethink the Pierrot ensemble format—what sounds would *we* want to work with?”

This is, fittingly, a composer’s question; the ensemble’s instrumental configuration—flute, clarinet, electric guitar, piano, double-bass—constitutes

an answer. Along with Patrick Burke and Mark Dancigers, Greenstein is one of NOW Ensemble’s three composers; in fact, although he and Burke are fully involved members, neither performs. (Dancigers is the electric guitarist.) All three use the forces on hand as governing influences on their composing styles. “For me, there’s a wonderful set of sounds that I’ve come to know—doublings and spacings that I consider my NOW Ensemble mode of operation,” says Greenstein. “There’s the possibility of a lot of different sounds coming out of the ensemble. If you look at Patrick’s scores, Mark’s scores—everyone treats it in different ways. That said, there’s going to be a NOW Ensemble sound, by virtue of this [instrumental] combination.”

Reflecting its idiosyncratic nature, the group is as likely to play in a pub or art gallery as in a standard concert environment. “We aren’t doing this to say ‘concert halls are bad’; it’s to say ‘everywhere is interesting,’” Greenstein explains. Still, the nature of

SEGGUES

Joel Smirnoff, first violinist of the **Juilliard String Quartet** and chair of the violin department at The Juilliard School, has been appointed president of **Cleveland Institute of Music**. He will succeed longtime CIM president David Cerone, who is retiring. Smirnoff will continue to perform with the Juilliard quartet next season, as the ensemble searches for a replacement.

The **Colburn Foundation** has appointed Ruth L. Eliel executive director, succeeding Allison Sampson. From 1997 to 2007, Eliel was chief executive of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

The Jupiter String Quartet—Nelson Lee and Meg Freivogel, violins; Liz Freivogel, viola; and Daniel McDonough, cello—received one of the four Avery Fisher Career Grants awarded in April 2008.

Music in the Mountains (Durango, CO) has appointed Guillermo Figueroa as its new music director and conductor and Gregory Hustis as artistic director. Hustis, principal horn of the Dallas Symphony, has been the festival's chamber music director and artistic advisor for the past 12 years.

Julia Reinhart has been appointed managing director of **Lyric Chamber Music Society of New York**, succeeding Carlos Tomé. A former executive director of the Manhattan New Music Project, Reinhart is a past winner of the CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming by a Jazz Ensemble for the concerts she produced in New York City's public parks.

The **Attacca Quartet**—Amy Schroeder, violin; Keiko Tokunaga, violin; Gillian Gallagher, viola; Andrew Yee, cello—won the Silver Medal of the **International Chesapeake Chamber Music Competition**. Earlier this year, the quartet took the Grand Prize at the **Coleman Chamber Music** competition in Pasadena.

Cellist **Jeffrey Solow** has been elected president of the American String Teachers Association. A soloist and chamber music performer, he is professor of cello and chair of instrumental studies at Temple University's Esther Boyer College of Music and Dance.

NOW's music may make the ensemble a little forbidding for traditional presenters. "It's not like a string quartet, where I might know that every year we would play at this venue or this festival. But [presenters] take for granted a core of traditional programming that an ensemble already has under its belt, and we don't have that. With us it's all adventurous. It's not because we don't have the pedigree—our players come from the same places as those players. It's just that we're kind of weird."

Just this year, the ensemble launched its own record label, not just for its own music, but for its colleagues in the New York new-music scene, including *Sō Percussion* and the electric violin/electric guitar duo *itsnotyouitsme*. "A lot of the time, these things [self-released CDs] float in the wind," Greenstein says. "It seems that if we can all come together, we can achieve an economy of scale."

The first Amsterdam Records release, fittingly enough, is *NOW*, featuring the group playing works by its three member composers as well as Nico Muhly. The CD is remarkable not just for its music but for its packaging, featuring eye-catching art by Brett Budde, and as slickly designed as a major-label pop release. "We aren't competing [simply] with other self-released CDs; someone who's looking just thinks 'I'm going to buy great music,'" says Greenstein. "So right off the bat you're competing with everything from the Budapest String Quartet to the latest Jay-Z.

"I feel like classical music needs to wake up and smell the coffee," Greenstein continues. "You go to school and you're told that if you work very hard at your craft, that's what's going to get you recognized. There's something very safe in pretending we have our own secluded little world. If the only people we have to worry about are my peers in school or the people who shop in the classical music section—it's safe. But people aren't going to find us if we're sitting there doing our own thing, locked in our own little room." In NOW's music-making, along with its recording venture, Greenstein seeks to obey a different mandate: "Bringing our tradition and history to them in ways that will be fresh and interesting and current."

www.nowensemble.org

Desert Song In real estate, the proverbial key to success is “location, location, location.” The same is true for summer music festivals, which so often profit from the synergy of great music and spectacular surroundings. Certainly, few are better situated than the **Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival**. The New Mexico resort town boasts not only spectacular terrain, but distinctive architecture, an opera festival, galleries and museums—and an avid listening public.

Ever since its founding in 1972, the festival has attracted the nation’s top musicians. The 2008 events last from July 20 to August 25, with more than 40 concerts at its home base and in Albuquerque—about sixty miles away. Participants include Pinchas Zukerman, Lynn Harrell, Jeremy Denk, and the Orion and Shanghai String Quartets, to name just a few; and the fare varies from standard repertoire to 19th-century rarities to contemporary music. A series of syndicated radio concerts helps give the festival a national reputation; this year, BBC Radio 2 is picking up eight of the broadcasts.

SFCMF has a vigorous, longstanding commitment to commissioning—a focus that has only gained in importance since composer Marc Neikrug became artistic director in 1998. The festival makes a special point of arranging co-commissions so that the works will be performed at least twice, and in more than one venue. This season, for instance, will see the premiere of *Nonet*, a piece by Robert Sierra for the Miami String Quartet and the Imani Winds—a commission shared with Stanford Lively Arts and Chamber Music Northwest. As explained by Steven Ovitsky, the festival’s executive director: “Marc and I truly believe that part of the mission is to create new music that we will [present] here and very much hope will get performed in other places.” Other commissions this year include pieces by Huang Ruo, Kaija Saariaho and Joan Tower.

For musicians and audiences alike, a big part of the festival’s appeal is Santa Fe itself. “You’ve got two hundred restaurants for a city of 70,000 people,” says Ovitsky. “You’ve got the incredible blue of the New Mexico sky and the moderate summer weather. The perfect combination of all these different elements make it a great place for people to come and visit.” www.sfcmf.org



SANTA FE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, A PRIMARY FESTIVAL VENUE.

In Memoriam

Bebe Barron, electronic music composer

Henry Brant, composer

Israel Cachao López, bassist, composer

Ozzie Cadena, jazz producer

Leyla Gencer, soprano

Jimmy Giuffre, clarinetist, composer, arranger; Giuffre-Hall-Brookmeyer Trio

Jerry Kravat, bandleader, producer, artist manager

Wilred Mellers, critic and musicologist

Siegmund Nissel, violinist, Amadeus String Quartet

John Straus, trustee, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center