

THE Strad

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Pacific motion



Andrew Farach-Colton is struck by the pace and sheer energy of the young Pacifica Quartet, both on stage and off

The Pacifica Quartet celebrates its tenth anniversary this year and it's remarkable how much the players have achieved in a relatively short time. Indeed, their often daring repertory choices make them an especially rewarding group to follow, as anyone who witnessed their marathon performances of Elliott Carter's five string quartets will tell you. I caught up with this increasingly busy group the morning after hearing the musicians at the Miller Theatre in a typically eclectic programme: Mendelssohn's Octet and Milhaud's Double Quartet (with the Ying Quartet), and Steve Reich's Triple Quartet (with the Chiara Quartet). The Pacifica and the Ying are both highly polished but have very different performing styles, the Pacifica being more exuberant, both interpretatively and physically, as well as more reactive.

In conversation, the four musicians of the Pacifica are as energetic as they are on stage: their speech flows freely, complete with interruptions and overlaps. Yet there is a feeling of real naturalness here, along with quite a bit of humour and not a hint of irritation on anyone's part. 'We're one of those quartets that doesn't fight,' says violist Masumi Per Rostad, 'and that's something I'm very happy about. Everybody has respect for everybody else.' First violinist Simin Ganatra jokingly suggests that this lack of disagreement is because they all avoid

conflict, and the collective laughter that ensues leaves me wondering whether this is rather too close to the truth for comfort or ridiculously far from it. 'I think what's important is that we were friends before we became colleagues,' second violinist Sibbi Bernhardsson adds. 'There has been trust and liking among us from the get-go.'

Ganatra and Bernhardsson started playing together as teenagers, having met at several musical festivals, and the two violinists later studied at Oberlin with Roland and Almita Vamos – the parents of Pacifica cellist Brandon Vamos. Kathryn Lockwood, an old friend of Ganatra's from Los Angeles, was the original violist, but she left the quartet some five years ago and Rostad was brought on board.

'We decided early on that we were going to be very committed and serious,' Ganatra says, in an overview of the Pacifica's history. 'We agreed not to take on any outside work unless it involved the entire quartet. For the first three years, we kept to a daily schedule of rehearsing from nine to five.' The quartet spent a lot of time working on Haydn and Beethoven, Ganatra recalls. 'We wanted to learn to sound like a string quartet, and there's something about Haydn that does that better than any other music.'

After two years, the Pacifica players felt ready to enter competitions, and they found success quickly,

taking away top prizes at the 1996 Coleman Chamber Music Competition as well as the 1997 Concert Artists Guild Competition. 'The Concert Artists prize really gave us a boost,' Vamos says, 'because when you win you get management – and it's the kind of management that's very nurturing and helped us adjust to becoming a professional quartet. We were able to play at venues where we could try out new repertory and there wasn't huge pressure.' Thus, when the Pacifica walked off with the Naumburg Chamber Music Award the following year, the players had the collective confidence to move their career into higher gear.

It was at this time that the quartet established a residency at the University of Chicago, another boost that gave it greater financial stability. And the string of successes continued, with further awards, recordings, a two-year performing residency at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center that began in 2003, and an additional residency at the University of Illinois.

But the Pacifica is just one of many fine young quartets making the rounds, and recognition and long-term success is predicated on more than awards and residencies. A quartet must establish its own persona in order to survive and thrive – and this the Pacifica has done without even a hint of gimmickry. Certainly, the competitions were important, but it was the quartet's ►



LEFT playing the Elliott Carter cycle at New York's Miller Theatre in 2002

decision to perform the Carter cycle that helped move the Pacifica to the front ranks.

Actually, the Pacifica had had Carter's String Quartet no.1 in its repertoire long before the idea of playing the cycle was even considered. Later, the String Quartet no.5 was added: a work, Bernhardsson points out, that couldn't be more different from the First. The musicians became curious: how did Carter develop his style? Could one follow the development through the middle quartets? The answer, they found, was a resounding 'Yes.' 'It's a linear progression,' says Rostad. 'Throughout the five, one finds Carter working out related ideas that explore the question: what is a string quartet? Such as – how do we work? How do we interact?' And then, laughing: 'How do you react when somebody says something weird to you?'

It's one thing to learn these five dauntingly difficult works – the quartet devoted two months of daily rehearsals to laying the groundwork – and something else again to think about playing all five of them in one sitting. Presenters balked and even the bold impresario of Columbia University's Miller Theatre, George Steel, had misgivings at first. Steel eventually took the risk and the result was a triumph that landed the Pacifica a rave review from the New York Times – the paper's lead critic later listed the Carter concert as one of the 'top ten' musical events of 2002.

'After that,' Ganatra says with a smile, 'other presenters were more open to the idea.' The Pacifica has gone on to perform the cycle across the US and in Japan, maintaining all five works in its active repertoire, and the musicians hope to record this important body of work a few years down the road.

Playing the Carter cycle may have been an incredibly risky endeavour, given the amount of preparation required, yet it has payed off handsomely, not only filling their burgeoning press kit to overflowing but also establishing the Pacifica as an intrepid ensemble

PLAYING THE ELLIOTT CARTER CYCLE MIGHT HAVE BEEN RISKY, BUT IT HAS ESTABLISHED THE PACIFICA QUARTET AS AN ENSEMBLE WITH AWESOME TECHNICAL CHOPS

with awesome technical chops. Somehow, the Pacifica has also resisted being pigeonholed: the musicians say they relish playing both the old and the new, and that the mixture aids their own musical development. Vamos gives an example: 'Carter's music calls for so much individuality in the parts; every voice is independent. And that's really helped us when we go back and play Haydn or Beethoven, to have the musical personality of each line highlighted.' Bernhardsson points out that it works the other way around, too: the ideals of balance and clarity they

strive for in Haydn are particularly helpful in making Carter's often densely textured music speak more eloquently.

Choosing repertoire is, clearly, a major issue in the life of any quartet, and a lot depends on how the players' tastes interact – whether the chemistry is right. 'We have strong ideas about repertoire individually,' Ganatra admits, 'but the string quartet repertoire is so vast and so diverse. We don't want to specialise. We just want to play music we all agree is great.' Not that they always agree. Rostad, for example, wants the group to delve into Boccherini's music but the others aren't entirely persuaded – not yet. Choosing carefully becomes increasingly important as the quartet gets busier. 'We're a group that takes on a lot of repertoire,' Ganatra says. 'We feel stuck if we play something for too long.' Now the Pacifica is planning three and four years ahead and this is where difficulties sometimes lie in store. As Vamos puts it: 'You can't always tell just from listening to a piece or looking at the score whether you're actually going to like playing that piece a second or third time.'

The Pacifica gives many one-off performances, like last night's programme of Mendelssohn, Milhaud and Reich. And two weeks earlier the quartet was at the Miller Theatre for a programme devoted to the little-known Russian modernist Nicolay Roslavets. As for the group's 'regular' repertoire, it currently includes music by George Crumb (his 'Black Angels'), Osvaldo Golijov and Ruth Crawford Seeger along with Beethoven's op.131 and the complete quartets of Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn's quartets are a pet project of the Pacifica, in fact, popping up on a great number ▶

of its programmes these days, and the players have recently recorded the cycle for the Chicago-based Cedille Records. Vamos says the ensemble came to Mendelssohn early on. 'We've always felt an affinity with his music. Only one or two works are played a lot – the others are more or less on the fringe of the repertoire – but all of them are terrific.'

Ganatra notes that their decision to look at Mendelssohn's quartets was fuelled by the same curiosity that made them explore Carter's five. 'We played the early quartets and then started playing op.80, and we thought, "Wow, this couldn't be more different." And, yes, the development is there – his music changes a lot.'

Ganatra's comment sparks an intricate, overlapping discussion among the four musicians. 'It's not like the progression one sees in Beethoven,' Vamos notes, 'but op.80 is very dramatic – it was written after his sister passed away – and when you look at op.12...' Rostad

interjects: 'One of the hardest things for Mendelssohn was that he was such a prodigy, more than Mozart in some ways. He was doing such incredible things at such a young age. He was so innovative. Just think of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the Octet. These are groundbreaking works and it was hard to follow up on that. But he refined his style.'

According to Rostad, playing Mendelssohn's quartets is unusually satisfying. 'His voice-leadings and chord progressions are so well written. It's an easy thing to overlook, but when you're playing it just feels right – especially from the inside, playing viola. I love the way everything works out.'

Ganatra seizes upon Mendelssohn's lyricism while Bernhardsson argues for the composer's ardour. 'Of course,' Bernhardsson admits, 'there's that essential Mendelssohnian lightness, but a work like op.44 is incredibly romantic and passionate.'

Vamos agrees, at least to an extent: 'Everybody is always talking about

the lightness of Mendelssohn's music, but I'm not always sure I buy it. There's a lot of drama, like at the opening of op.44 no.2.'

Talk of Mendelssohn's style segues neatly into a discussion of the Pacifica's next recording project. This is an exploration of classics from the first half of the 20th century: quartets by Crawford Seeger, Janáček ('Intimate Letters') and Hindemith (his third).

Crawford Seeger's work is another of the Pacifica's causes, and the players discuss it with the zeal of converts. 'It's a masterpiece!' Bernhardsson exclaims.

Ganatra concurs: 'Oh my gosh, it's such an amazing piece – one of the great American quartets. I just can't understand why it's not played more.' Rostad fields an explanation: 'It's a really difficult piece – three hours of music packed into eleven minutes. But her technique is fantastic and there are some groundbreaking things, like the third movement, which is seamless. It swells...' ▶



LEFT the quartet's next recording project is an exploration of early 20th-century classics: Janáček, Hindemith and Ruth Crawford Seeger

RIGHT The Pacifica players count the Juilliard and Cleveland quartets among their main sources of inspiration



'And the swells become the rhythm,' Bernhardsson says, taking over Rostad's thought in mid-sentence.

Given their eclectic musical interests and strong convictions, it's probably not surprising that the Pacifica players count the Juilliard Quartet as a key source of inspiration. 'They always took the composer's perspective,' Rostad notes. 'I think that's a very valuable

lesson.' The Cleveland Quartet was another source of inspiration, and Paul Katz – Vamos's teacher at the Eastman School in New York State – has a special bond with the group. 'Paul has always been there to help us,' Vamos says. 'Actually, one of the reasons I wanted to be in a quartet in the first place is because I was around the Cleveland players

refining how we work, like a machine that always needs a little bit of tweaking. You push it this way or that and gradually it runs better. We've learned a lot from some of the older quartets, like the importance of scheduling every day way into the future.' Vamos agrees: 'When you're handling so much repertoire, planning becomes

crucial, especially figuring out how much rehearsal you need for each particular piece.'

But while they admit to the importance of long-range planning, the Pacifica players are a little shy to reveal many specific plans just yet. They're looking forward to adding Elgar's chamber music to their repertoire, making their second appearance at the Wigmore Hall (where Beethoven's op.132 is on the programme), and to a recital at Alice Tully Hall. Tours of Brazil, Iceland and a return trip to Japan are other upcoming highlights, along with vaguer plans for a Schoenberg quartet cycle and further exploration of works from the 1920s and 30s which are discussed more cautiously.

Now that they are becoming an international presence, do they feel any responsibility to promote American music? Bernhardsson enthuses about the high quality of American music today, but Ganatra admits that the ensemble has no nationalist loyalties. 'We all have such diverse backgrounds,' says Rostad. Indeed. Ganatra's father is Pakistani; Bernhardsson is Icelandic; Masumi is half-Japanese, half-Norwegian; and Vamos comes from a family of Eastern European Jews. Rostad smiles slyly: 'You might say we're the quintessential American quartet.' **B**

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