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Free spirits: the St Lawrence Quartet players combine non-conformity with tradition

In 20 years, the Canadian-bred St Lawrence Quartet has held strong its reputation for playing of high calibre and high jinks in equal measures, as BRIAN WISE discovers

The St Lawrence Quartet members got fed up with business as usual last year, and the circumstances of their new recording of Haydn and Dvořák shows why. During a meeting with EMI, their label since 1999, a representative said that the company had enough recordings of Haydn string quartets in its catalogue, and besides, Haydn doesn't sell. The players did more than just shrug off their dissatisfaction and move on, however. They did something about it.

Despite what label executives may have told them, the St Lawrences believed there was an audience for Haydn, especially in the run-up to the bicentenary of the composer's death, and they had a track record of five discs that earned several critical and industry honours, including two Grammy nominations and a Canadian Juno Award. The ensemble wanted to record Haydn's op.77 no.1 and op.54 no.2 and, while they were at it, Dvořák's Quartet op.106.

So what next? The Canadian-bred ensemble was approaching its 20th anniversary. Rather than turn to repertoire that didn't ignite their passions, the players decided to go directly to their fans. The group set up a partnership

with ArtistShare, a seven-year-old company that allows fans to donate money to pay for the production of their favourite artists' recordings. In return, fans receive exclusive tidbits, such as autographed CDs and backstage passes.

The 'crowd-funding' model resembles an old-fashioned patronage system, with fans providing varying degrees of support: a 'bronze' level supporter, for example, donates \$150 and receives an autographed CD, a credit listing on the CD and monthly video updates in return. The \$2,500 'silver' participant gets VIP access to the quartet's concerts and an iPod pre-loaded with the quartet's favourite music. For \$18,000, an 'executive producer' gets, among other things, an invitation to a recording session. The quartet went to work, hiring the Grammy-winning producer Judith Sherman and setting up a series of recording sessions at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, where the members teach as artists-in-residence.

Although the fan contributions haven't entirely covered the cost of the quartet's recording, the scheme nonetheless appeals to an ensemble based in the heart of California's Silicon Valley. 'The traditional model serves a purpose,' explains Christopher Costanza, the quartet's cellist and business mind. 'Having EMI

backing us, producing discs and selling them in stores was great. Well, except that most of the stores don't exist any more.' ArtistShare, which has worked with jazz artists including bandleader Maria Schneider and trombonist Bob Brookmeyer, but never a classical ensemble, distributes its recordings exclusively via its website.

'When you think of classical music audiences,' Costanza continues, 'the stereotype is that they're older and more traditional in what they want to hear. ArtistShare presents their artists in a non-traditional way. This way we could build a whole new fan base, a new set of possible supporters. We want to connect with younger people.'

FOUNDING VIOLINIST GEOFF NUTTALL has a more blunt assessment of the group's decision to make an album with ArtistShare. 'You make records either because you have a big ego or because you think it might allow you to get more concerts,' he says. 'Hopefully it's for the second reason. The EMI contract makes people think you are better than you were before the EMI thing, even though you are the same. But you don't make money off recordings.'

Nuttall and Costanza are sitting alongside the other two members of the quartet >

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE



St Lawrence Quartet players (clockwise from above left): Lesley Robertson (viola); Scott St John (violin); Geoff Nuttall (violin); and Christopher Costanza (cello)



PHOTOS: MARCO BORGESINI

– violist Lesley Robertson and violinist Scott St John – in a small backstage room at the Baryshnikov Arts Center on Manhattan’s West Side. Less than an hour later they will be on stage shrieking, shouting, laughing and walking about the black-box theatre as part of R. Murray Schafer’s highly theatrical String Quartet no.3, a signature piece for the St Lawrence. Just as the quartet has sought out alternative ways to produce and distribute its recordings, its 20th anniversary year is being celebrated in other non-traditional ways.

Unlike some major quartet anniversaries, there is no marathon cycle of complete Beethoven or Bartók quartets planned, no CD reissues and just a handful of celebratory concerts. Rather, the quartet will premiere commissioned works by five Canadian composers, each representing a different province from the players’ homeland. In addition, January saw the premiere of John Adams’s String Quartet, which the players have since toured and recorded for a Nonesuch release in the autumn (they haven’t completely given up on traditional record companies). Indeed, the

St Lawrence anniversary seems less about nostalgia and self-satisfaction and more about a quest to maintain its passionate intensity and fierce sense of adventure.

‘TIME IS A DANGEROUS THING,’ says Nuttall, a free spirit who today looks trim and dapper, no longer displaying the wild hair colours or exposed tattoos of earlier in his career. ‘On one hand, a string quartet needs years to get to a baseline level of professionalism. At the same time, you think of the people that kept it going – [Juilliard Quartet violinist] Bobby Mann is the one who comes to mind – and there’s this weird, childlike craziness to him. The Amadeus Quartet had some of that. Every once in a while you hear a quartet that hasn’t lost its perfection but perhaps has lost some of the craziness of its younger days. That’s the constant challenge – to try to get better in terms of cleanliness and all of the important stuff, and not lose that edge.’

Robertson says she’s not particularly nostalgic. ‘The early years were pretty brutal,’ she says. ‘For a long time we didn’t >

sound very good. It was great to work really hard on something. But it took a long time before we got anywhere. Each year that passes I'm having more fun.' Robertson is the quartet's other original member still with the group. St John joined in 2006, succeeding Barry Shiffmann, and Costanza came aboard in 2003, replacing Marina Hoover.

In 1989, Robertson was midway through graduate school at the Juilliard School when Nuttall approached her about joining a new string quartet. Soon, she and the other three members converged on Toronto to participate in a special training programme, jointly run by the University of Toronto and the Royal Conservatory of Music. To make this possible, funds from the Ontario Arts Council were directed to the fledgling quartet, which was named after Canada's mighty St Lawrence River. There were some candid words of warning. 'People would say you'd be lucky to survive a year or two,' Nuttall says. 'And it's true – you see a lot of talented quartets more physically gifted than we were peter out for whatever reason.'

INDEED, ONE OF THE QUARTET'S CHIEF INSTRUCTORS in its first year was Dennis Brott, cellist of the Orford Quartet, which itself disbanded in 1991. With Brott's help, the St Lawrence's career was boosted through a specially created series of



Violinist Geoff Nuttall displayed a wilder image earlier in the quartet's career

ERIC CHONG

'The Adams is a very headbanging piece in a lot of spots. It's a whole body experience to play'

GEOFF NUTTALL

concerts featuring the young players with such eminent artists as violinist Jaime Laredo, pianist Anton Kuerti and clarinetist James Campbell.

From Toronto, the St Lawrence moved to New York in 1990 to study with the Emerson Quartet (through the Hartt School of Music), followed by two years at Juilliard, where it was graduate quartet-in-residence. The players concluded their training as teaching assistants to the Tokyo Quartet at Yale University

starting in 1994. Meanwhile, they attracted global attention by winning several prizes, including the first Banff International String Quartet Competition in 1992. Today, the St Lawrences perform 100 to 150 concerts a year, and maintain a particularly devoted following in Canada.

'In the late 80s and early 90s there was something magical with that group,' recalls Shiffmann, who left the ensemble in 2006 to become director of the Banff competition. 'The Brentano, the Ying, Miami, Artemis – these were quartets that all had sustainability. We were the groups that had the best training that was available. There was an incredibly rich tradition of giving back.'

Shiffmann describes the directness among the members as grounded in their shared backgrounds growing up in Ontario. 'I'm not going to >

FAN-FUNDED MUSIC

WITH CD SALES ON TRACK to plunge for a fifth year in a row, according to figures from the Nielsen Co., it might seem foolish to view recorded music as fertile ground for investment. But for thousands of fans there's never been a better time to gamble on a favourite artist's future. Several companies allow listeners to 'invest' in unsigned artists, with the investors betting that the acts will eventually sell enough records to make a profit. Here are three of the biggest companies:

ARTISTSHARE (www.artistshare.com) is an internet-based service that enables fans to finance recording projects in exchange for greater access to an artist's work. Rather than go through labels, distributors and retailers, ArtistShare sells recordings over the web and turns over all the proceeds (minus a small fee) to the artist. Along with the St Lawrence Quartet, the company includes a substantial roster of mostly jazz artists.

SELLABAND (www.sellaband.com) lets music lovers buy \$10 shares in unsigned artists. When an artist reaches \$50,000, Sellaband will connect them with record producers and studios to record and market an album. To date, the firm has raised cash for 31 acts to record discs. Classical music is limited here, with a few exceptions, including Jerzy Wolochowicz, a cellist from Warsaw, and the Vienna-based String Inspirations Quintet.

SLICETHEPIE (www.slicethepie.com) is Sellaband's UK rival, and asks users to review anonymous tracks in return for a small fee (a few pence), with the most popular acts entering a two-week showcase, where labels might find them and offer them a deal. From then on, Slicethepie takes a back seat, describing itself as a financing site rather than a label. A very small handful of classical artists appear in a search for the genre.



The St Lawrence players put their closeness down to their shared Canadian roots

be malleable in each situation.' He adds: 'Even within a piece, there are moments that you want to sound like the Guarneri Quartet: lush, perfectly blended, everything really round. There are moments when you want to sound wild and out of control like the early Juilliard Quartet.'

Sarah Rothenberg, the pianist and artistic director of Da Camera of Houston, believes the St Lawrence's malleability separates its players from other quartets. 'They're alert to different ways of playing,' she says. 'A lot of other quartets play with a more homogeneous approach but the St Lawrence Quartet looks to all styles of playing that can inform its own style. When these musicians play Haydn, they're very aware of the way early-music groups would play Haydn.'

tell Geoff, "Please don't do this." It was, "Shut the hell up!" It was direct and it was honest and it was fun and it was passionate. You had to advocate for your artistic case and you had to be ready to fight for it.'

Contrary to the occasional stories of flying chairs and toughened egos, the St Lawrence players seemed downright mellow when I met them in a post-rehearsal meeting at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC, in May. There are still moments of wild non-conformity in the group's performance style: Nuttall's animated gestures on stage have become legendary; his grimaces, airborne leg movements and occasional head-bopping are a marked contrast to Robertson's more introverted manner. Costanza says he 'felt more liberated to be myself', when he came to the St Lawrence from the Chicago Quartet. 'I felt a little straitjacketed before. Nothing against them, but it was just a slightly more regimented situation. Hopefully I'm being a little more myself now.'

NUTTALL ADDS THAT ANY PHYSICALITY is an outgrowth of the music itself. 'Hopefully whatever movements we do are connected in a positive way to the effect of the music. The Adams is a very headbanging piece in a lot of spots. It's a whole-body experience to play.'

Adams wrote his String Quartet, reportedly in a quick burst of inspiration, after hearing the St Lawrence perform late Beethoven. The piece is Adams's first full-size quartet without electronics, and at times the 30-minute work suggests the hazy textures of Debussy and Ravel along with touches of Minimalist chugging. Presenting it at the Memminger Auditorium at Spoleto, the group played it as if possessed, diving into its propulsive, restless patterns and seeming like an entirely different ensemble from the one that participated in Chausson's lushly romantic Concerto for violin, piano and string quartet the previous day.

'The idea of a group sound that's always the same is a bad thing,' says Nuttall. 'It suggests you don't have the ability to

THE ST LAWRENCE PLAYERS HAVE APPEARED on the Da Camera series on several occasions, just as they regularly play in top venues like Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and New York's Carnegie Hall. But they are willing to perform just about anywhere they're wanted, and some of their favourite memories involve small towns. In a visit to one remote Canadian village (with a population of 110) the quartet performed in a converted bowling alley. 'I remember there were something like 72 people there, and the guy who came and opened the hall for us had to go back and milk the cows,' Robertson recalls. 'We had the reception at the local legion across the street. They had pie. It was great.'

Theirs is a life of airports, rented minivans and constant rehearsals, but the St Lawrence have made it work, balancing family lives with a busy career. They remain especially committed to their native Canada and will occasionally play for a pittance to bring music to secluded concert halls in the provinces.

'The system that allowed us not to have to play *Les Miz* was really important,' says Nuttall, alluding to the generous arts funding that existed in Canada during the late 80s and 90s. 'That's the Canadian system that helped us out. That's part of going back there now; remembering those tours to funky little towns.' ■

WIN THE ST LAWRENCE QUARTET'S NEW CD

We have ten copies of the St Lawrence Quartet's new disc of quartets by Haydn and Dvořák (ArtistShare) to give away. For a chance to win one, visit www.thestrads.com/stlawrence or send a postcard with your name, address and telephone number to the address shown on page 87. The first ten entries picked out of the hat will each receive a CD. Closing date: 30 September 2009

