

Everything Essential

HOW A SMALL CONSERVATORY BECAME AN INCUBATOR FOR GREAT AMERICAN QUARTET PLAYERS

BY MATTHEW BARKER

“There’s something about the quartet form. Albert Einstein once said, ‘everything should be as simple as possible, but not simpler.’ That’s the essence of the string quartet,” says Arnold Steinhardt, longtime first violinist of the Guarneri Quartet. “It has everything that is essential for great music.”

From Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert through the Romantics, the Second Viennese School, Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, the avant-garde, and up to the present, the leading composers of each generation reserved their most intimate expression and genius for that basic ensemble of two violins, a viola, and a cello.

Over the past century America’s great music schools have placed an increasing emphasis on the highly specialized and rigorous discipline of quartet playing. Among them, Curtis holds a special place despite its small size. In the last several decades alone, among the majority of important touring quartets in America at least one chair—and in some cases four—has been filled by a Curtis-trained musician. (Mr. Steinhardt, also a longtime member of the Curtis faculty, is one.)

Looking back, the current golden age of string quartets can be traced to a mission statement issued almost 90 years ago by early Curtis director Josef Hofmann: “To hand down through contemporary masters the great traditions of the past; to teach students to build on this heritage for the future.” Mary Louise Curtis Bok created a haven for both teachers and students to immerse themselves in music at the highest levels without financial burden. But with Hofmann’s strong emphasis on developing soloists and Leopold Stokowski’s goal of filtering players into the Philadelphia Orchestra, would the school invest in chamber music?

Any question was removed upon the hiring of Louis Bailly, who taught at Curtis from 1925 to 1941. A former member of the renowned Capet and Flonzaley Quartets, Bailly set high standards as the head of Curtis’s fledgling chamber music department. Among his first protégés were violinist Jascha Brodsky, violist Max Aronoff, and cellist Orlando Cole. These three, along with violinist Charles Jaffe, would become longtime members of the Curtis String Quartet, named in honor of their alma mater and ongoing benefactor.

In a 1930s landscape almost devoid of American string quartets, the achievements of the Curtis String Quartet cannot be overstated. Following a performance at the White House in 1934 they became the first American-born and -trained quartet to tour the United Kingdom and Europe. They also introduced new audiences to the music of Samuel Barber, who wrote his String Quartet, Op. 11 (with its famous adagio) and *Dover Beach*, Op. 3 for the group. Both works were premiered at Curtis, and the quartet’s recording of the latter work from 1935, with Barber as the solo baritone, is for many the version to own. “They were a phenomenal quartet,” recalls Mr. Steinhardt. “They were just finishing their career when I started at Curtis, but we definitely saw them as early pioneers.”

Across the country another pioneering group, the Hollywood String Quartet, made their own significant impact both domestically and in Europe through their landmark recordings. But groundbreaking as both ensembles were, the “American” label was still considered a handicap by some of the classical music intelligentsia—particularly compared to leading European ensembles such as the Kolisch, Pro Arte, Busch, and Budapest quartets. And despite growing interest, no American quartet subsisted solely on the profits of its concerts or recordings, a glass ceiling not lost on an emerging generation of would-be chamber musicians.

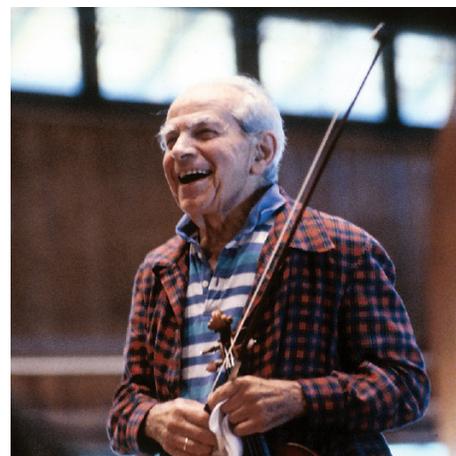
“Nobody talked about playing string quartets for a living,” recalls Mr. Steinhardt. “I grew up with the idea of becoming a soloist, becoming the next Heifetz. The number of string quartets making a living in America—you could count them on one hand.”

OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD

But as Mr. Steinhardt was growing up, change was taking root. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, a massive number of European musicians sought refuge in America, bringing their traditions with them. Artists such as Felix Galimir, Rudolf Kolisch, the Budapest Quartet, Adolf Busch, and Rudolf Serkin all found new homes and wasted no time spearheading their advocacy for chamber music. In 1951 Busch and Serkin co-founded the Marlboro Music School and Festival in Vermont, to this day the mecca of summer chamber music festivals.

Marlboro proved to be an important stepping-stone for many Curtis musicians who were developing their passion for chamber music but lacked the proper support from a school

Felix Galimir “had the best ears I’ve been around and the best way to get students so immersed in the act of music making,” says Steven Tenenbom. “He was old world and new world.”



Above: Felix Galimir was a mentor to young chamber musicians. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA/COURTESY MARLBORO FESTIVAL AND SCHOOL

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: (Top left) The Curtis String Quartet in the 1930s: violinists Jascha Brodsky and Charles Jaffe, violist Max Aronoff, and cellist Orlando Cole PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

(At right) A high proportion of the country’s leading quartets have counted Curtis alumni and faculty among their members, including the Orion, Borromeo, Vermeer, and Brentano quartets.

(Lower left) The Guarneri Quartet (from left): John Dalley, violin; Michael Tree, viola, Arnold Steinhardt; violin; and Peter Wiley, who replaced founding cellist David Soyer in 2001

(Middle left) Formed at Curtis, the fast-rising Dover Quartet has launched a major performing career. PHOTO: LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

String Quartets on Coursera

Curtis presents a new massive open online course (MOOC) beginning February 5. Teachers Arnold Steinhardt and Mia Chung will guide online learners through the history of string quartet music, colored by stories of legendary quartets and insights from the stage. Learn more at www.curtis.edu/Coursera

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still recovering from the war. “It was a bit of an orphan at the time,” says Mr. Steinhardt. “My generation at Curtis, we sort of fell in love with chamber music and began to play it for ourselves.” Two of the students he played with constantly were violinist/violist Michael Tree and violinist John Dalley. After several summers together at Marlboro they joined with veteran cellist David Soyer to form the Guarneri Quartet in 1964. Whether they created a wave of popularity or simply rode it, the Guarneri (along with the Juilliard Quartet, which had formed in 1946) became flag bearers for the chamber music explosion of the 1960s. Their success was proof that American string quartets could indeed thrive in a historically European idiom.

As the 1960s progressed, Marlboro became Curtis’s *de facto* summer program, producing further outstanding ensembles (such as the Vermeer Quartet, led by violinist and Curtis alumnus Shmuel Ashkenasi). When Rudolf Serkin became the director of Curtis in 1968, he brought the spirit of Marlboro to Philadelphia with him, appointing the Guarneri Quartet and cellist Mischa Schneider of the Budapest Quartet to the faculty and re-establishing Curtis as a leading center for chamber music study.

Another hugely influential Serkin appointee was violinist Felix Galimir, who headed Curtis’s chamber music department from 1972 to 1985 and joined the violin faculty in 1992. “He had the best ears I’ve been around, and the best way to get students so immersed in the act of music-making,” says violist Steven Tenenbom, founding violist of the Orion String Quartet and a member of the Galimir Quartet from 1985 to 1993. “He was old world and new world. He could have you laughing hysterically and crying at the same time. He would do everything to try to get somebody to hear the music on a sophisticated level so they would become great musicians. It was totally complete with him.”

With such luminous faculty providing guidance, American string quartets went from being scarce to abundant in less than a generation, many calling Curtis home.

THE NEXT GENERATION

By the 1980s and ’90s many of the students who received their training from Brodsky, Cole, Galimir, Serkin, and the Guarneri Quartet returned to the school to teach, continuing a tradition of chamber music study at Curtis. They also shifted the balance to a predominantly American faculty while further deepening a connection to Hofmann’s longstanding mission. The commitment from these new contemporary masters was palpable. Appointed strings chamber music coordinator in 1996, Mr. Tenenbom says he “wanted personally to try to make Curtis a chamber music destination so students would be attracted to the school.”

That attraction still centers around a faculty of venerable chamber musicians—“the mentors and idols we all looked up to throughout our education at Curtis,” says Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, violist of the Dover Quartet, which formed in 2008 while its members were undergraduates. “The environment is one that makes students want to form groups, even in the most basic social sense,” she adds. “Chamber music was a way of enjoying our passion for music and sharing it with our best friends.” The Dover Quartet returned to Curtis in 2013–14 as quartet in residence in the first such program offered by the school. (This year the residency is held by the Aizuri Quartet, which counts two Curtis alumni among its members; see sidebar.)

Indeed string quartets are never far from the Curtis spotlight, whether the anchor of a Curtis On Tour program, the topic of an all-school project, or the focus of a residency by a visiting ensemble. As Curtis celebrates its 90th anniversary it is difficult to imagine it offering more to aspiring quartet players. “There’s no school on earth that has a more spectacular faculty, specifically in terms of the knowledge and understanding and feeling for chamber music,” says Mr. Steinhardt, who will lead Curtis’s massive open online course (MOOC) on the string quartet for Coursera beginning in February.

Even with a modest output of graduates, Curtis wields a profound influence on chamber music in America, as it has done since its founding. As the history of quartet playing in America unfolds, the school will inevitably play a pivotal role in elevating the art form. “Great musicians like to play all types of music,” says Mr. Tenenbom, “and part of the training in being a good musician is knowing how to listen to each other. I’m really proud of the faculty and the school itself for not losing what music is all about.” ♦

Matthew Barker is director of recitals at Curtis.



Aizuri Settles at Curtis

Curtis’s string quartet program, now entering its second year, welcomes the Aizuri Quartet as quartet in residence for the next two years. The ensemble, formed in 2012 by graduates of Curtis and the Juilliard School, will be coached by Curtis faculty with broad and deep chamber music experience. They’ll also mentor younger student musicians and participate in Curtis On Tour, concertizing with Curtis faculty member and Guarneri Quartet veteran Peter Wiley. From left: Karen Ouzounian, cello; Zoë Martin-Doike, violin; Ayane Kozasa, viola; and Miho Saegusa, violin. PHOTO: JAMIE JUNG

More Online

View an archival exhibit on string quartets at Curtis at

www.curtis.edu/Archives