



The Dover Quartet: violinists Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, and cellist Camden Shaw PHOTO: CARLIN MA

## The Spark of Originality

Nurtured at Curtis, the Dover Quartet is increasingly recognized for its identifiable voice.

BY DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

When brought together to rehearse as students, the members had an “aha” moment. Faculty member Shmuel Ashkenasi picked up on it. “Have you guys considered getting married?” he asked.

As the string quartet world grows increasingly competitive, the Dover Quartet claims 100 to 140 engagements a season, from Carnegie Hall to the Lucerne Festival, and has a repertoire of 250 works. Audiences are right to take such elements for granted, as the group plays with a warmth of tone recalling the Guarneri Quartet to some ears, and maintains consistency no matter how little sleep its members have had lately.

Backstage the four players, all hovering around the still-passionate age of 30, note the more personal triumph they share: their tenth anniversary since forming at Curtis Institute of Music, having weathered early-life bumps that have derailed other quartets.

“We talk about the age of a quartet being similar to the age of a person,” says violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt. “When you’re at the toddler stage, a little ‘ouchie’ is painful. When you become an adolescent, you have a scrape and it’s like, ‘well, whatever.’ You get stronger. If somebody loses their cool, it doesn’t bother us that much anymore.” First violinist Joel Link agrees. “The longer you work together, the more you know the things that you can push against and argue about in a good way—and things you just need to let go.”

The Dover Quartet has a surprising lack of house rules. Rarely are decisions made by a simple majority, if only because one seriously unhappy player would be unhealthy for the whole group. Says cellist Camden Shaw, “Almost every decision is discussed until there is some outcome deemed fair. This can be lengthy. But I think it is one of the reasons we’ve been able to stay together for ten years so far.”

Initially the two violinists of the Dover Quartet alternated in the first and second positions, in a practice famously espoused by the Emerson Quartet, among others. “But now we are set in our spots,” says second violinist Bryan Lee. “We follow an old Guarneri rule, where if there is only one violin needed for a particular piece—a piano quartet, for instance—I get right of first refusal.”

### A PARTICULAR PERSONALITY

For all its work with Guarneri veterans Arnold Steinhardt, Michael Tree, and Peter Wiley—all Curtis faculty who coached the Dover members in various ensembles when they were students—the Dover Quartet has its own personality. What initially intrigued Mr. Steinhardt about the group was “the spark of originality.”

Certainly, any successful quartet has to think for itself in the changing world, especially with a repertoire including very-much-alive composers such as Mason Bates and Edgar Meyer who embrace popular culture references in ways that past composers rarely dared attempt. Incidental solos have more personality than in quartets of decades past. At one point during a recent rehearsal, the group decided that a certain phrase had more to say when the instruments weren’t playing strictly together—probably not something they ever heard in a Guarneri coaching. More telling was the moment when Mr. Link told his colleagues, “We’re trying to feel something we don’t feel”—to silent nods of agreement.

Amid the Dover’s three past complete Beethoven cycles (with recordings planned in 2019), the composer’s ultra-fast metronome markings demand to be examined, thanks to the historically-informed performance movement. “Trying to fit into a box that somebody has given you can be pretty scary,” says Mr. Shaw. A tempo that sounds sparkling inside her head, said Ms. Pajaro-van de Stadt, can be labored when executed. The solution, they say, is considering the intent behind the tempos. And if Beethoven appears to be going for something shocking, the Dover players follow suit, minus the tone quality they’d cultivate in Mozart.

“Some quartets sound exactly like themselves no matter what they’re playing, and others sound completely different depending on what they’re playing. I think we’re in the middle,” said Ms. Pajaro-van de Stadt, whose viola was once owned by Boris Kroyt of the Budapest Quartet—the polar opposite of the Guarneri Quartet. And surely there are common threads that run throughout their broad repertoire. “They have a beautiful voice as a quartet,” says composer and bassist Edgar Meyer, “and Joel has a naturally slow vibrato, God bless him. It’s a way of playing that lets the music shine through with very rich expression and personality.”

### AN “AHA” MOMENT

The Dover Quartet formed in 2009 while undergraduates at Curtis, where they had already benefited from superb chamber-music coaching. Mr. Shaw recalls that Peter Wiley’s guidance was mostly about giving players tools to use in their own way. “He encouraged me a lot to play deeper, darker and louder,” while advocating a more vibrant emotional presence. Members recall that, in coachings with Michael Tree, tempo markings that seemed to say “fast but not too fast” became Zen-like discussions.

But it was Curtis faculty member Shmuel Ashkenasi who ultimately popped the question. As third-year Curtis students, Ms. Pajaro-van de Stadt and Mr. Shaw admired Mr. Link and Mr. Lee, then fourth-year students, from afar. When brought together to rehearse, they had an “aha” moment. Mr. Ashkenasi picked up on it. “Have you guys considered getting married?” he asked.

Not literally, of course. But going to Rice University together for graduate studies was a commitment. They then became Curtis’s first string quartet in residence of the modern era in 2013, winning the Banff Competition just as their residency began, and seeing their collective career take off almost immediately. They were named the Cleveland Quartet award winner in 2015 and received a strong seal of approval with an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2017.

Though the group teaches part time at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University—sometimes with students older than they are—they live in Philadelphia. It’s a

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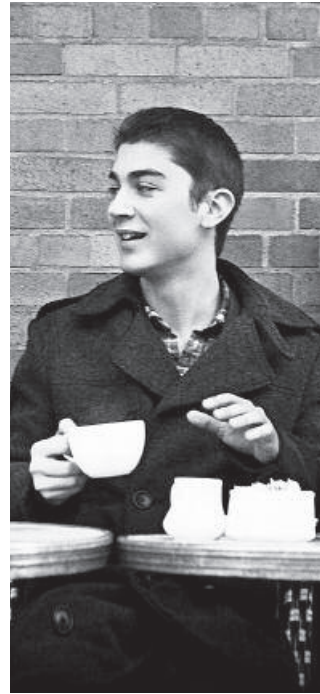


During their year as Curtis’s first quartet in residence through the Nina von Maltzahn String Quartet Program, the Dovers practiced in a room graced with a portrait of the Guarneri Quartet. PHOTO: HELENE VAN ROSSUM

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[Curtis.edu/Overtones](http://Curtis.edu/Overtones)



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convenient jumping-off point for touring the rest of the world, and their roots at Curtis are a factor. The group took its name from *Dover Beach*, a breakthrough piece by distinguished Curtis graduate Samuel Barber. The players continue to use practice rooms inside the main building at 1726 Locust Street. Another plus about living along the northeast corridor is Ms. Pajaro-van de Stadt's marriage to cellist Brook Speltz (also a Curtis alumnus) of the New York City-based Escher Quartet. "We never see each other, but we understand each other," she says ruefully.

Ah yes, the life. Anything involving travel is increasingly challenging, especially amid scheduling bottlenecks that have the members checking into a hotel at 11 p.m. and checking out four hours later to catch an early flight. And they still have to pay their own health insurance. Mr. Steinhardt commiserates: "One day you can be staying in some five-star hotel. Other times it's Motel 6 in a college town. It careens back and forth."

The reward? Daily contact with the greatest music by the greatest composers. That's what kept the Guarneri going for 45 years. And at ten years, the Dover Quartet may be just hitting its stride. ♦

David Patrick Stearns is a music critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and contributes to *Gramophone*, *Opera News*, and WQXR. This is his first article for *Overtones*.



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The answer for members of the Dover Quartet is "romance"—an airy concept, but more important than one might think. "Some schools emphasize the business side of existing as a musician. Curtis has a romantic, spiritual relationship to music—plus this old building with all of its mysteries and secret passageways under the basement," said cellist Camden Shaw. "You're surrounded by people who are just as much in awe of the place as you are," said violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt. "Everybody is buzzing. People are always getting together to play chamber music. You'd check out a stack from the library, go through to see who checked it out before, and it goes back decades often to famous persons before you. Nobody I know has ever left Curtis feeling jaded."