

THE ANCORA



STRING QUARTET

Title: Local Chamber Groups Thrive as the Classical Music World Downsizes

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By: Sandy Rucker-Tabachnick

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The classical music world has gone small as chamber groups lead the way while symphony orchestras recoup financial losses. An unexpected result of the shift from large to small is that chamber groups are popping up everywhere. Retirees who haven't played in a while are getting their cellos and violins out of the attic, whipping them into shape and joining friends for a jam session of Haydn string quartets. Musically inclined nine-to-fivers hold down day jobs while playing in quartets with co-workers or just people they meet on the street. Small is in, and Madison is no exception.

The Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society, for example, performs summer festivals that showcase about 20 local and international musicians. If you want up-to-the-minute news on what composers are writing, a Bach Dancing concert is the place to start. But it's not limited to au courant. Artistic directors Stephanie Jutt and Jeffrey Sykes look at classical music's big picture, so you will hear contemporary trios and quartets on the same program with Bach, Beethoven and company.

The group had its first concert of the summer last weekend at the Overture Playhouse (see review on page 15), and it continues on June 21 with an American and European mix. The programs on June 28 will feature American composer Aaron Jay Kernis, a forty-something Pulitzer Prize winner whose composition "Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby" brings a blissful sigh to the lips.

"I've heard a lot of new pieces over the years, but I have never been so moved by a new piece as I was by this," says Sykes. "It's extraordinarily beautiful."

Another Kernis piece on June 28, "The Four Seasons of Futurist Cuisine," will feature John DeMain, music director and conductor of the Madison Symphony Orchestra. "It's a setting of a Futurist tract from the 1920s, imagining how food will be used in the future to evoke and provoke different responses from people," says Sykes. "It's written for piano trio and narrator, and John is our narrator."

Kernis will play the piano, a throwback to the old days when composers and performers were one and the same. In keeping with Bach Dancing's regard for the old and the new, this season is titled "Same Carriage, Fresh Horses."

The Madison Bach Musicians uses some 25 players throughout the year. Some are 24/7 musicians while others squeeze practicing in at night. Formed in 2004 and headed by Madison keyboardist and educator Trevor Stephenson, the MBM plays music composed between 1685 and about 1750, J.S. Bach's significant dates.

With 25 musicians, Madison Bach Musicians breaks down easily into small groups from trios to nonets, or even larger configurations. The players perform mostly on Baroque instruments, so Stephenson stays well connected in the early-music network. He had to contact area trumpet players to find Barry Baugess, who came from North Carolina to play Baroque trumpet for Bach's "B Minor Mass" in May.

"In Bach's day, Baroque trumpeters were like the untouchables," Stephenson says. "The instrument was so difficult to play that only a few people in Europe could actually do it."

But the instrument that embodies Baroque like no other is the harpsichord, and Stephenson often conducts the Madison Bach Musicians from a 90-pound replica of a 1667 instrument built by his colleague Norman Sheppard. To get a closer look at Sheppard's handiwork, I drove to Stephenson's home and spent an evening playing this delicate keyboard. Coming from the school of modern piano technique, I needed time to get used to its short, slender keys, fewer octaves and lack of a damper pedal that my right foot kept fishing for. The sound was a lot of things — quiet, mysterious, brisk. It came at me quickly and didn't linger long.

With the harpsichord and Baroque winds and strings, the Madison Bach Musicians takes us into the quiet energy of a Vermeer painting. Bach cantatas are the group staple.

"Bach's music is beautiful and brilliant from millisecond to millisecond," says Stephenson. "It speaks with urgency to modern audiences."

The Pro Arte String Quartet, resident string quartet at UW-Madison, is one of the oldest quartets in the world. The present group, with violinists David Perry and Suzanne Beia, violist Sally Chisholm and cellist Parry Karp, has been playing together for about 13 years, long enough to develop a personal style.

"In the music industry, we say that New York is the height of the promotional style and that the American style is ever faster and louder," says Chisholm. "Our style is more elegant, more spontaneous, with brilliant energy as needed."

The life of a Pro Arte player is a bit like having two full-time jobs with a performing residency and a teaching load. The group performs about 25 concerts a year under contract with UW-Madison and about five to 10 touring concerts. Rehearsals for these concerts are scouting missions, discussing what's provocative about the music and what should be explored, but Chisholm says the ideal rehearsal has few words.

"Breathing together at the cadence points, feeling the music physically and singing along inside create a group pulse. Eventually breathing and the group pulse become inseparable, and when this happens, you can get spontaneous group ideas that occur to you together. Those are the moments we remember."

In 1912, the original Pro Arte players served as the court quartet to Queen Elizabeth of Belgium. The group was in tune with the new tonality and vision of 20th-century composers, and Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Bartok flocked to have Pro Arte perform their music. While playing a Beethoven cycle in Madison in 1940, World War II erupted and Pro Arte couldn't get back home. They accepted a residency at UW-Madison, the first residency of its kind at a major American university. Through almost 100 years, the quartet has seen the comings and goings of world-class musicians and has weathered a number of financial storms, including its near demise in the mid-1970s.

Today, spirits are high as Pro Arte commissions music for its centenary celebration in 2012. "Commissioning works for a quartet these days can cost from \$5,000 to \$90,000," Chisholm says. "We have a very large budget for the celebration, with angels that are part of the commissioning project and also some UW angels that are helping out."

To relax, the players enjoy going for a burger now and then. "Besides being a great violinist, Suzanne is also our dessert critic. She was even judge for a chocolate competition one year," says Chisholm. "We idolize David. He was in the group two years before he even played a note out of tune while sight-reading a difficult violin part. I thought, 'He's human.' Parry is a great player from a great family of players. It's a very good group for getting spontaneous ideas, but you can't hunger for that too much. You just play and see what develops. It's a nice thing."



The Ancora String Quartet, quartet in residence at the First Unitarian Society, is the younger string quartet on the block. Violinists Leanne Kelso League and Robin Ryan, with Marika Fischer Hoyt on viola and Benjamin Whitcomb on cello, have been together since 2003 and spent a long time deciding on just the right name. When they opened the Dictionary of Musical Terms and started with "A," they liked the sound of ancora, Italian for encore. But what nailed it was a phrase that Michelangelo wrote along the edge of one of his paintings, "ancora imparo," which means "I am still learning."

A day in the life of a string quartet for Hoyt means tending to its regular business, getting details for a wedding performance, answering phones and emails and working out just the right viola technique for a

Verdi string quartet or for a Beethoven symphony with the Madison Symphony Orchestra. Whitcomb, professor of cello and music theory at UW-Whitewater, analyzes galaxies of notes for the meaning of this chord or that cadence. League is associate concertmaster for the MSO and assistant concertmaster for the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra. As Ancora's first violinist, she makes sense of melodies and how they breathe. Ryan is a lawyer for the state Legislature by day and a violinist for the MSO on nights and weekends. She does the quartet's legal work when needed.

"When we decided on our name, Robin made sure that there was no infringement on our part with Ancora Coffee Roasters," says Hoyt. "We have a nice relationship with the owners of the coffee shop and even play for some of their new spots."

You would be hard-pressed to find a group that plays the Indigo Girls better, but Ancora savors string quartet repertoire above all. "Composers put their most intimate thoughts and passions into string quartets. They're like crucibles," says Hoyt. "The music is brought down to its bare essentials, and every voice is pivotal."

Ancora has unfettered energy, and players plunge head first into the cold waters of untested repertoire. After a demanding concert of quartets by Arriaga, Verdi and Schubert in February, the fiddlers greeted their admiring fans, faces aglow with the thrill of musical adventure.

The Wingra Woodwind Quintet takes us to outdoor spaces. It must be the mellow sound of the French horn blended with all that wood that reminds me of wind blowing through the trees. Bassoonist Marc Vallon with Marc Fink on oboe, Linda Bartley on clarinet, Stephanie Jutt on flute and Linda Kimball on horn are the present incarnation of Wingra, woodwind quintet in residence at UW-Madison since 1965.

Vallon moved from Paris to Madison in 2004 and brings French sentiment to the group. "On a woodwind instrument, you tend to produce your native language," says Vallon. "French articulation is different because the French speak more in front with the tongue by the teeth more. The French style is lighter, less solid and potentially faster and more brilliant than the American style."

Wingra players have teaching careers and also play in other venues like the Madison Symphony Orchestra, where Fink, Jutt, Bartley and Kimball are principals. Kimball is also principal horn with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra. Jutt will be on leave from Wingra for the next few semesters devoting time to a grant she received while local flutist Dawn Lawler stands in.

A challenge of chamber playing is that relationships among players are not always made in heaven. Vallon told me of a string quartet where the first violinist and cellist never spoke to each other. "We [Wingra] have different opinions about things, and we're very different from each other, but we're mature and put the music first and try to be good ambassadors for the School of Music."

The *mélange* worked well for a few Stephen Foster songs in their April concert. With soprano Mimmi Fulmer, the quintet became a chorus that sang along with her. Ligeti's "Bagatelles" and Hindemith's "Kleine Kammermusik" were rhythmic delights, and their complexity was overshadowed only by the fun that Wingra was having playing them.

"Some people think that because it's chamber music, they're not going to like it, but we have a very appreciative audience," says Vallon. "Everyone who comes to our concerts has a very good time."

Many other chamber groups grace Madison: the Oakwood Chamber Players, Token Creek Chamber Music Festival, the Wisconsin Brass Quintet, the Hunt String Quartet, Con Vivo, Quartessence, the Rhapsodie String Quartet, and on and on. But a lot of folks just play in their homes for the fun of it, letting the music drift into the streets and take them wherever.