

A 20-year marriage of musical minds - the Lafayette String Quartet.

Written by Linda Rogers
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Wheel of Fortune, the Lafayette Quartet plays for the cure

"How many players in a quartet?" violinist Ann Elliot-Goldsmith cracks as we all try to squeeze our derrières on one bench outside the music building at UVic, where the members of the Lafayette Quartet teach and assemble the sound that has made them world famous, not to mention giving Victoria a big gold star on the classical music map.

It is a sunny afternoon and, miraculously three of the members are present for an interview about their life and times together and the festivities that will mark their Twentieth Anniversary. Violinist Sharon Stanis will be back in town next week and I warn the trio that she will have the opportunity to refute everything they say. No problem, they agree. "We don't have one bad thing to say about one another." More laughter.

I ask if humour is the leaven that keeps these already astral players rising and they agree that joy opens up their creativity. I know the absent Sharon is a joker. "Is that her job in the group?" I ask. "No!" all three admitted alpha females insist. "We are all in charge of everything, laughter, tears and decision making." Even Steven, we used to say when we divided our candy at school.

Imagine the restaurant table that is hard to balance, one leg shorter than the others. Grappling with sightlines, calibrating inner and outer voices, leading and following, the quartet is about finding the perfect conversation between voices of equal value. That the Lafayette has kept that integrity for twenty years is miraculous. Having witnessed band divorces, I know that a quartet, in addition to being the most difficult musical configuration, is a marriage of four people with double the problems of matrimony. Finding consensus requires diplomacy no less difficult than the playing of complicated and demanding music. The quartet calls themselves "subservient exerters." Listening and speaking is their requisite process.

A poll reveals that all three present are middle children, neither the eldest nor the youngest, and notoriously easy to get along with. "But Sharon is the eldest in her family." cellist Pamela Highbaugh Aloni tells me. More laughter. Temperamentally attuned to one another after years of challenge and compromise, the four women play like siblings, the call and response of instruments as faultless as synchronized heartbeats. With hard work and good fortune, familiarity breeds harmony.

Fate brought the first three members of the quartet together at the University of Indiana and completed it in Detroit, where all four played in the same chamber orchestra; and fate brought them to Victoria where they are artists-in-residence at the university. Teaching, they concur, nourishes their awareness of the potential of musical expression and provides a base livelihood, which is a challenge for any and every artist. Having endured the hardships of their apprenticeship, the four musicians know what it means to hunger for music.

It is a carnivorous world. Joanna Hood describes the competitiveness of music and the superficial nature of contemporary culture, where even classical musicians are expected to be fashion models. "Someone in Holland actually told us we were the best looking quartet he had ever heard." Ann is outraged. "This was after we had played our hearts out!" she adds. "People ask us about our dresses and our shoes" Pamela puts in, rolling her eyes. I shared my story about a famous American poet complimenting me on my hair after a UN Poets for Peace reading in San Francisco. We agree that there is still a long way to go in evaluating women artists. "It's getting worse," Joanna mutters.

Musical childhoods are most often the precursor to careers in music. The Lafayette Quartet is no exception to the rule. Because Pam was the daughter of a church organist, choir and piano were the warp and woof of her formative years. Eventually, the native of San José California found the cello was a better fit to her velvet inner voice. Pamela is married to violist Yariv Aloni and they have a ten-year-old son, Liam, who has perfect pitch but at the moment seems determined to become a pilot. Perhaps all those years of watching his parents fly around the world have conditioned his aspirations.

Violist Joanna, who was born in Portland, the Rose City, is the child of a jazz composer and musician and the sister of a rocker. I was not surprised when she mentioned that of the four she is the one most comfortable with improvisation. Playing with or without a score has something to do with brain patterning. For classical musicians interpretation happens in the breathing spaces between notes, the quality of tone and crispness of technique. Joanna's early experiences allow her to step out of the classical role and relax with jazz and folk music. Her musical sisters agree that the violist brings this genius for harmony to the group, musically and temperamentally. Her calm alto voice is the matrix of consensus.

First Violinist Ann, who has opted to sit on the pavement facing us using her flip-flops as a cushion, began violin at five. Curious as to whether she was of the Suzuki generation, I asked about her early tutelage. "I did a combination of Suzuki (learning whole pieces by ear) and sight reading. In the end, I felt limited by the Suzuki repertoire." Having seen the difficulty some children have in making the transition from learning by ear to learning from the page, I think she must have been lucky in that opportunity for versatility. She was also fortunate in having her ear informed by the constant playing of her concert pianist mother.

Ann has two daughters, Ella and Abbie. Ella plays the trombone and Abbie studies violin with Kathryn Ranger, who also has a daughter Abbie. "It must be comforting for Kathryn to have her as a student," I think aloud. Kathryn's Abigail is grown and making her life elsewhere. Movement is more than a musical interlude; it is a lifestyle. Pamela and Ann agree that Victoria is a wonderful place to raise a family, although Ann admits that having come from the Maritimes she had a few years of homesickness when the quartet first moved here. It is amazing that the Lafayette Quartet has survived the transplant of not only four performers but their husbands as well.

Many challenges have faced the group over the years. Illness and loss, bringing up babies, and other professional demands put a strain on loyalties, but the musicians agreed that the visceral need to play together has if anything grown over time. Their mid-morning rehearsal time caters to mothers with schedules and their differing nocturnal and diurnal natures. Strings as resilient as the ones they bow pull these women toward one another and the music they love. They are all compelled by the sound they make together.

When I ask which is their favourite album, Ann says, "All of them." They give the same answer when asked about choosing composers. Ranging in historical time from Haydn to Schafer, the quartet repertoire is a candy store. "We will eventually get around to performing everyone's picks," Pam assures me. Later, Sharon Stanis tells me she is just coming to love the twentieth century repertoire, and is looking forward to Janacek's "Intimate Letter" and the Sibelius Quartet.

Beyond the challenges of keeping the intimacy of the group apart from the integrity of their private lives and integrating the nasal obbligati of snoring audience members, there are physical hazards in playing music. Pamela says she is irritated by the perennial question, "Why don't you pick something smaller than a cello to haul around?" Apart from requiring its own airplane seat and liking to travel first class, the cello is heavy to carry. There have been bouts of tendonitis. First violinist Ann was surprised when her lawyer husband reasoned that her physical difficulties arose when she played a borrowed Stradivarius. "I was afraid of dropping it, so my body was tense."

I suggest Guan Bing, my beloved doctor of Chinese medicine and massage, and all three ladies pounce on the recommendation. Musicians' arms are as vulnerable as dancers' feet. Not only are performers expected to be beautiful these days, they must also stay fit to keep up with the demanding schedules of three careers: performing, teaching, and raising families. Inside every musician there is an athlete in training. Wynton Marsalis once told me he takes a skipping rope on tour. I wonder how tolerant his hotel mates are of his post concert floor thumping.

The biggest physical challenge to the group was Pamela's bout with breast cancer. Fortunate that her lymph nodes were not involved, the cellist was spared the agony of frozen shoulder, often the result of surgery; and she was back in the group in (no pun intended) record time. "Music is an amazing friend in tough times," she says.

With respect to all those who suffer, and in particular Ann and Pamela's mothers and Sharon's cousin, the musical sisters are dedicating their Twentieth Anniversary celebration to finding the cure for breast cancer. There will be a question and answer and music session September 27 at 7:30 at the Murray and Ann Frazier Hall and a concert at the University Centre Farquhar Auditorium on September 30th to support early detection. That concert, the evening before Run for the Cure, should be an inspiration to runners, who, like the fine lady upon a fine horse, will have music wherever they go.

Because I am married to a mandolinist with instrument acquisition disorder, I am curious about the group's attachment to the instruments they play. Pamela says she is happily wed to her George's Clarke mid-nineteenth century Italian cello because of its warm tone and rosy colour. The cello came to her via a genteel stint in the tearoom at The Empress Hotel. She likes its pedigree. Similarly, Joanna hears the kindness in her mid-eighteenth century Aireton viola, which once belonged to Cleveland's Martha Katz, whose sister lives in Victoria. "It is a family relationship," she says. "This instrument came with all its history in the sound."

"I could be tempted to leave my violin, but not my husband," the pragmatic Ann declares. I see glimmers of instrument disorder; a certain look in her eye that tells me there may be a magic fiddle out there that could tempt the first violinist like an extra dessert. The acquisition of her eighteenth-century Italian violin of unknown provenance was mid-wifed by double bass virtuoso Gary Karr, who has become something of an instrument *yenta* to his musical friends. Angels and mentors like Gary and Lafayette's early coach and colleague Rostislav Dubinski, the violinist who has since gone to spirit, have graced the path to this moment of celebration with metaphorical rose petals.

A few days later I talk with the second violist at the home of the ensemble's agent Lydia Kasianchuk. Sharon Stanis, whose antecedents are Poles from Cleveland, has the Slavic flair for drama. Her playing is coloured by genetic history. A Lawrence Welk fan and granddaughter of a fiddle player, she studied violin from the age of eight. Her complementary passion was for The Singing Angels Choir and she admits to loving the limelight. Once, long ago and faraway, she played one of Joan Sutherland's children in *Norma*. Now, when the aches and pains of holding her Balestrieri violin make her body cranky, the opera fanatic sometimes wishes she were Joan Sutherland. The diva lurks.

Sharon may be tempted to impale Karr on her precious Tubbs bow when she reads his playful comment about her. "Like the prima donna singer that is an integral part of Sharon's character, when she performs second fiddle in the Lafayette Quartet one gets the impression that the other three are on stage just for her," Karr wrote to me. Perhaps she upstaged *him* in a recent concert. However teasing his comment, it brings home the point that this democratic entity has no "second fiddle" and no patronized viola. I recently read a Chinese cookie fortune that said, "The view only changes for the leading dog." The Lafayette Quartet has no lead dog. They are *The Four and the One*, the title of David Rounds' book in praise of string quartets and the Lafayette in particular.

"I love my violin," Sharon says with the same fervour she expresses when describing her husband, digital magician and former Swell Prod punk bassist Mark Franklin. For Sharon, whose personality erupts in histrionic facial and hand gestures, her instrument, which has a quieter disposition than her own, is a subduing influence that keeps her on the same page with her musical colleagues. An intuitive reader of the emotional gestalts in music, her greatest challenges are, she says, staying "in tune" and "in time" with her partners.

Passion, delicacy and confident attack describe the sound of the Lafayette quartet. While the integrity of individual composers is the under-painting of their catholic repertoire, the unmistakable balance of energy and sensitivity is their signature. For my ear, signature is the appropriate word because when I close my eyes and listen to their music, it isn't painting I see but exquisite calligraphy, the line thickening and thinning, singing now with a legato voice and now with exclamatory impudence. When artists are in control of technique, they are able to take risks. Years of familiarity and hard work means that individual Lafayette players have the safety net of the other three, who are listening to the one and the many. Here the lines blend to one voice and here another road is taken by a laughing violin, a passionate viola or a sobbing cello. Their blended and singular voices reveal all the emotional nuances of a woman's life. That is what speaks beyond musical notation.

The ladies talk about "peaking" in terms of performance and, when I ask if they have a stale date, assure me that they are ripening and coming of age with the passage of time. Favourite moments like the time they played his mother's composition for folkie Mike Seeger, when they played Ravel in Powell River, when Joanna was honoured to play Paul McCartney's songs at his wife's funeral, and every time one phrase flows seamlessly into the next keep the quartet moving forward. "We know one another better every day," they say of this unconsecrated marriage, which sings when the music surprises them with its beautiful separate identity.

This year, their agent and huge fan Lydia Kasianchuk has booked concerts worldwide in order to treat as many listeners as possible the healing power of the quartet's sumptuous harmonies. Composer Marjan Mozetich says he can't wait to hear them in Kingston, Ontario. "We need more exposure to the Lafayette in eastern Canada." If there is a cure for cancer, it will be in the key of C, the lovely bottom note on the cello and viola. Turned on its side, the key of C is a coracle that floats their sound across oceans of insecurity to the other shore where pain and suffering are transformed into bliss. That is what the Lafayette Quartet hopes to give in this special year dedicated to making a joyful noise to silence the illness that interrupts too many beautiful journeys.

The Lafayette Quartet will be performing in Victoria

Gala Concert- Saturday September 30, 7:30 pm at the University centre Farquhar Auditorium

LSQ and Friends- with Luba Edlina, Yariv Aloni and Paula Kiffner - Sunday February 11, 2:30 pm at the University Centre Farquhar Auditorium

Looking Toward Our Future- Third Annual B.K. Weigel Concert-Friday and Saturday, April 6 and 7, 8:00 pm, Philip T. Young Recital Hall

Linda Rogers is working on the second novel in her Victoria Trilogy, which begins with *The Empress Letters*. *The Third Day Book* is the story of the granddaughter of opium smugglers who plays an Amati cello.