

# *The* Striad

## Lafayette String Quartet

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MAGIC MOUNTAIN

SPIRIT OF GUARNERI

## North American Frontiers







# Four women for four Amatis

THE LAFAYETTE STRING QUARTET RESIDES AT THE HEART OF CHAMBER MUSIC LIFE IN CANADA.

**BARBARA McDougall** ASKS THE GROUP ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL AMATI INSTRUMENTS THEY PLAY



In a happy marriage of two outstanding Canadian resources, the University of Victoria's Lafayette String Quartet has been loaned the University of Saskatchewan's exquisite set of Amati instruments.

It all began when a young grain farmer of Icelandic heritage, who settled in the Canadian prairies, developed a passionate curiosity for old Italian instruments. The young Stephen Kolbinson traded a bicycle for his first violin, and continued to trade in violins the way other farmers trade in horses. He also dabbled in making violins and bows, studied the violin, and eventually played some concerts with the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra. But his most fervent avocation was to watch the market for authentic antique instruments to add to his growing collection. As he acquired instruments, he simultaneously acquired knowledge, and as he matured, his opinion became internationally respected by dealers and makers. His success as a wheat farmer



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Left to right: 'Daisy Kennedy' violin, Nicolo Amati 1637; Brothers Amati violin 1627; Brothers Amati viola, 1606; Right: Hieronymus Amati cello of 1690



**'It is right and proper that these instruments become the property of a Canadian institution. They are works of art that no modern skill can ever duplicate.'**

enabled him to purchase truly valuable instruments in the 40s and 50s (including a Stradivari and a Guarneri 'del Gesù'), and by 1958 he had finally achieved his dream of owning a quartet of Amati instruments.

The violin used by the first violinist was made in 1637 by Nicolo Amati III. In the early 1900s, it was owned by Otakar Ševčík, who passed it on to his outstanding student, Australian violinist Daisy Kennedy, after her successful debut in the Queen's Hall, London, in 1911. Kennedy later honoured a promise to Kolbinson to give him the first chance to buy this instrument, even though this evidently resulted in the disappointment of 300 other interested buyers.

The second violin was made in 1627 by the Brothers Amati (Antonio and Hieronymus). It had been part of a private French collection, and was brought to England during the Nazi invasion of France. Later it was sold to David McCallum, leader of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and upon his retirement in 1955, purchased by Kolbinson.

The unusual Amati viola was commissioned by the famous Italian Borghese family, whose head at that time was Pope Paul V. The instrument was completed in 1606 by the Brothers Amati, and the back features a painting of the Borghese family coat-of-arms. It is generally believed that the instrument is cut down from its original size. The viola had been in the private collection of Walter Simmenauer in Paris, when Kolbinson purchased it in 1958.

Hieronymus Amati II fashioned the cello which completes the quartet, and the instrument is the youngest – at just over 300 years old. At the 'button' where the neck meets the body, there is a red-orange seal depicting the joint arms of the Earl of Plymouth and the Clive family, commemorating the marriage of one of the Earl's ancestors to a daughter of General Clive of India. Hill's of London purchased this cello from the Earl's estate in 1947, and it was sold by them to Kolbinson in 1957.

With his dream finally attained in 1958, Kolbinson, in a gesture of unbelievable generosity and altruism, arranged the sale of these four instruments to the University of Saskatchewan for the astonishingly low price of £10,000. Through his letters to his close friend, composer and violinist Murray Adaskin (formerly Professor of Music at the University of Saskatchewan), we can read of Kolbinson's incredible munificence: 'It is right and proper that these instruments become the property of a Canadian institution. They are works of art that no modern skill can ever duplicate.'

In this letter one can sense the reverence this exceptional man had for these Amatis: 'One can hold these instruments and forget the present world to dream of the emotions earlier owners of these works of art must have gone through... You can see how I look on these instruments as dignified and time-worn friends.'

Over the years spent acquiring these and other rare old Italian instruments, the persistent Kolbinson was largely responsible for removing a government tax which had in effect been restricting the import of such masterpieces. His tenacity is an inspiration to us all.

Murray Adaskin strove for many years to establish a Canadian string quartet to take up residency in Saskatoon, and several concerts and mini-residencies afforded the public the chance to hear these marvellous instruments. Unfortunately, however, no permanent quartet was established and the Amatis were relegated to a vault.

For just over a year now, that situation has changed, and the Amatis have found life again in the hands of the Lafayette String Quartet. Dr Adaskin finally saw his dream realised in the city where he now resides, Victoria. An invitation from the University of Saskatchewan to the Lafayettes to perform on the Amatis, playing Adaskin's own String Quartet no.1, resulted in a concert on 20 September, 1992. Afterwards, the women received the very generous offer to play the instruments indefinitely. In return they travel to Saskatoon twice yearly to perform and to work with young string players both at the university and in the community.

The energy and enthusiasm of these four women knows no bounds. They formed the group in Detroit in 1984 while they were members of the Renaissance City Chamber Players. ■



**Dr Murray Adaskin and Stephen Kolbinson with the quartet of Amatis in 1958**



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First violinist Ann Elliot-Goldschmid is a Canadian from New Brunswick. Early travels with her musical parents resulted in contacts with a great number of excellent teachers – the most influential for her being Victor Yampolsky. Her college years at Boston University exposed her to chamber music and convinced her that the narrow, lonely life of a soloist was not for her. Encounters with Diann Jezurski, the violist with the all-female Primavera String Quartet (1975-1983), who had worked extensively with Eugene Léner, impressed Elliot-Goldschmid indelibly:

...‘there was a certain use of the bow, a certain quality of sound that she had. Here was my introduction to the school of quartet playing that would become the constitution of our quartet.’

Elliot-Goldschmid describes Dubinsky as ‘our spiritual, musical, and formative father’. She says, ‘Whenever there are things that can go wrong, and do go wrong, he’s always behind each one of us saying, “Keep the quartet, keep the quartet – there is no problem that is insurmountable.”’ The Lafayette’s next scheduled recording (with Dorian records) will take advantage of this connection and their affinity for the Russian school, and will feature works by Shostakovich, Borodin and Stravinsky.

This winter will mark the quartet’s third year at the University of Victoria as artists-in-residence, and their presence has accounted for over double the enrolment of strings. As Elliot-Goldschmid puts it, ‘I don’t think anyone realised the synergism that was there. One person can do a lot, but four people can do eight times as much.’ As for her ‘Daisy Kennedy’ Amati, she says the tone is ‘golden... the violin is incapable of making an ugly sound’.



Second violinist Sharon Stanis grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. Fascinated as a small child by violinists on the Lawrence Welk show, she decided that one day she would play – perhaps not in that group but in the great Cleveland Orchestra. A dynamic bundle of energy, Stanis now relishes her role as second violin in the quartet. Her main teachers were Linda Cerone at the Cleveland Institute and later Henryk Kowalski at Indiana University, where she met the future violist and cellist of the Lafayette. By

September of 1983, the three of them had in fact joined with Dubinsky as their first violinist to work extensively as a quartet and to perform. Feelers were then sent out through Dubinsky’s network of colleagues, and the availability of Elliot-Goldschmid provided the missing link to complete the foursome.

The inevitable question arose concerning the origin of their name. ‘Well,’ said Sharon, ‘in order to drive to Ann’s apartment where we rehearsed in Detroit you had to leave the I 95 at Lafayette Street...’ The image suggested by the courageous French hero of the American Revolutionary Army and of the French Revolutions of 1789 and 1830 seemed to epitomise the women’s common desire to triumph in the ever-increasing throng of present-day string quartets.

Stanis also has a beautiful singing voice and made her debut at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House as Joan Sutherland’s illegitimate child in ‘Norma’ (alright, it was a silent role). She finds that the quartet repertoire is a way of coming to know a composer’s most intimate musical thoughts. As for her Amati, she says it sounds ‘like butter’.

Joanna Hood is the violist in the group. She grew up in Seattle, and her first teacher was Isador Tinkleman at the San Francisco Conservatory. Her post-graduate education took her to Indiana University where she studied with the Cleveland Orchestra’s principal violist, Abraham Skernick, and she also benefited from Stanley Ritchie’s teachings in Baroque and Classical music on period instruments.

The Amati viola which she plays is probably the most famous of the four instruments, and is featured in Karel Jalovec’s book *Italian Violin Makers*. Common thought is that the viola has been cut down from its original size. Hood says, ‘The size of this viola really opened my eyes – it’s 15 and 3/4 inches. I can play double-stops much better in tune, naturally. I can put my first and fourth fingers down without altering my hand shape – and play much more easily.’ She has loaned her own larger instrument, made by Geoffrey Ovington, to a student. Ovington’s instruments are in great demand, being played by the majority of violists in the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, and also by the violist of the Cleveland String Quartet, where Hood first heard one.

Hood uses no chin rest on the viola, merely a chamois cloth and a Kun shoulder rest. Her reasons stem from TMJ (temporomandibular joint) problems; the absence of a chin rest guards against undue squeezing and greatly eliminates the transfer of vibrations from the instrument to the jaw bone.



Cellist Pamela Highbaugh is also a west-coaster, having grown up in California. Her early teacher was Peter Rejto, and Highbaugh played in numerous orchestras in the California area as she was earning her degree and also teaching. Arriving at Indiana University to complete a Masters Degree with Janos Starker, Highbaugh found his teaching extremely valuable in providing so many technical tools; his concept of preparation for physically getting around the instrument was particularly beneficial.

Her chamber music studies at Indiana brought her together with Stanis and Hood. Of their coach, Dubinsky, Highbaugh says, ‘I learned more from him about bowing than I ever did while studying the cello. There’s nothing that you can do with a violin bow, in his mind, and in mine now, that you can’t do with a cello bow... it’s been so freeing.’ When asked about her Amati, she states, ‘I’ve never been able to get the sounds that I wanted on the A-string of any cello anywhere, but this has just depths and depths of sound.’

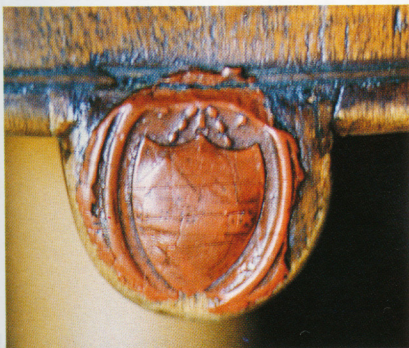




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Extensive coaching with Rostislav Dubinsky of the Borodin Quartet led to their winning the grand prize at the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition in 1988, and they also received prizes in the 1988 Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition and the 1989 Chicago Discovery Competition.

Rostislav Dubinsky has singularly remained their mentor, and they have also worked closely with the Cleveland Quartet (after winning the quartet competition at the Eastman School of Music) and with members of the Alban Berg and Amadeus String Quartets. A top priority on the Lafayette Quartet's list of goals is to establish a graduate



**Orange seal of the Plymouth and Clive families found on the Hieronymus Amati cello**

string quartet programme at the university in Victoria where they are artists-in-residence, and they have invited the Cleveland Quartet to perform on 14 January, 1994, with proceeds going to establish a scholarship for this programme.

It is the university's policy to share its facilities with the community and the winter season for the Lafayette Quartet has included participation in a free performance/lecture series. The women played and discussed two Beethoven quartets: op.18 no.6 and op.59 no.3, encouraging questions from and discussions with the audience.

An October tour in Europe included concerts in Salzburg and Innsbruck, and a collaboration with the Panocha Quartet for concerts in Holland. Their second CD will be recorded in New York in February, and the spring season will include a concert at the Vancouver Playhouse on 19 April with the Borodin Trio. The programme will include a Trio by Rachmaninov, Shostakovitch's Piano Quintet and Tchaikovsky's lovely String Sextet *Souvenir de Florence*. □



**Back of the Brothers Amati viola of 1607, commissioned by Pope Paul V, and bearing the coat-of-arms of the Italian Borghese family**