

the

Strad

ESSENTIAL READING FOR THE STRING MUSIC WORLD SINCE 1890

NORTH AMERICA FOCUS

String teaching, playing and making in the US and Canada

**THE LUTHIER
WHO SHOT
HIS WIFE**

**TEXAS FOLK
QUEBE
SISTERS**

**PAUL
ROLLAND**
HIS LIFE AND
TEACHING
LEGACY

YO-YO MA

THE INSPIRATIONAL CELLIST WHO
IS PUTTING THE WORLD TO RIGHTS

**'One of the musical values
we all treasure is that we
work towards something
bigger than ourselves'**

‘We’re free to look into ourselves and create the music we want’

As the Lafayette Quartet celebrates 25 years together without a single line-up change, **COLIN EATOCK** talks to its members about making music on an island, and whether there’s any such thing as female performance

Detroit’s Lafayette Avenue provided the inspiration for the quartet’s name

THE FIRST THING THAT’S APPARENT WHEN the Lafayette Quartet walks on stage is that its members are all women. But when they play, something less obvious can be seen: although their sense of ensemble is impeccable, the Lafayettes glance at each other far less than some quartets do. After 25 years together, they have found other methods of communicating.

A quarter of a century is an impressive milestone for any chamber ensemble, but a quarter-century without a single personnel change is remarkable. From their first concert, in Detroit in 1986, to the present day, the Lafayettes have always been violinists Ann Elliott-Goldschmid and Sharon Stanis, violist Joanna Hood and cellist Pamela Highbaugh Aloni.

But when I ask them, ‘How many concerts have you played together?’ – during a post-concert interview this summer in the Canadian resort town of Parry Sound, Ontario – they look at

each other, each hoping that someone else might have the answer. The question hangs in the air: nobody is keeping score. However, the Lafayettes have other ways of measuring what they’ve accomplished. ‘We’ve all given half our lives to this quartet,’ says first violinist Elliott-Goldschmid with quiet solemnity.

THE LAFAYETTE QUARTET CAN TRACE ITS ORIGINS BACK to the town of Bloomington, Indiana – and to Rostislav Dubinsky of the original Borodin Quartet, who taught at Indiana University following his defection from the USSR in 1975. Three of the Lafayette players (all but Elliott-Goldschmid) met as students at Indiana in the mid-1980s, and played in quartets with Dubinsky. Shortly after, in 1986, they met their first-violinist-to-be in Detroit. Elliott-Goldschmid had an indirect connection with Dubinsky: she had studied with Diann Pilafian of the Primavera



Quartet (among other teachers), who had herself studied with the famous Russian quartet player.

Dubinsky hovered over the Lafayettes like a benevolent godfather. 'He would say, "Whatever you do, girls, keep the quartet!"' recalls Stanis. 'And on our tenth anniversary, he wrote us a note: "My sincere condolences on your first ten years of hard labour in a string quartet. May Almighty God give you strength and wisdom to keep the quartet as long as you live." It's on the bulletin board in my studio.'

'I don't think there's a concert we've played in which I didn't feel Dubinsky's presence,' adds Highbaugh Aloni.

The young ensemble coalesced in Detroit – gigging and teaching around town, and continuing studies with the Cleveland Quartet. And when it was time for the players to enter their first competition, they realised they needed a name. Detroit's Lafayette Avenue (named after the French general who helped the

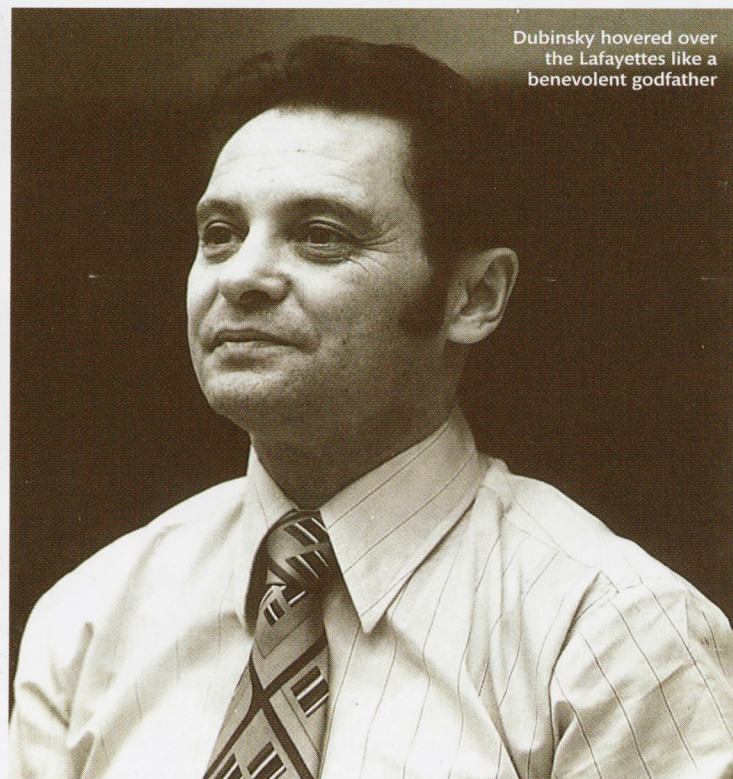
Americans win their revolution) was a serviceable inspiration, and the name stuck. The Lafayettes did well in competitions, winning prizes at the Portsmouth International String Quartet Competition in the UK, and the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition in Indiana.

THEIR FIRST BIG INTERNATIONAL BREAK CAME IN 1986, because of a disaster half a world away from Detroit. When the Chernobyl reactor melted down, fears of radioactive fallout spreading across Europe led a prominent quartet to cancel a concert in Munich. Bravely, and on short notice, the Lafayettes stepped in and flew to Germany. They weren't about to let a little radiation stop them.

By 1988 *Musical America* had dubbed them 'young artists to watch' – and the Lafayettes were busily making themselves >



Dubinsky coaching the quartet in 1994



Dubinsky hovered over the Lafayettes like a benevolent godfather

heard on the chamber music scene in the US. By now well established in the Detroit area, they found the city a convenient base, with ready access to American cities in the north-east and the Midwest. But three years later, their careers took them in a direction they would never have predicted.

In the Canadian city of Victoria, British Columbia, the local university was looking to expand its music programme, and went looking to hire a quartet-in-residence. 'Paul Katz of the Cleveland Quartet was president of Chamber Music America at the time,' explains Highbaugh Aloni. 'The university got in touch with him and asked if he knew of any young quartets who might be interested in auditioning for the job. Paul gave them our name.'

When the Lafayettes flew to Victoria in December 1990 to have a look at the place, three of them had been there previously. Hood and Highbaugh Aloni (who are both from the US West Coast) had visited on family holidays, and Elliott-Goldschmid (the only Canadian-born member of the quartet) had attended a summer music camp nearby. Stanis, originally from Cleveland, admits that until she visited Victoria she'd never heard of the place. But the quartet and the university hit it off, and the Lafayettes headed west.

LOCATED AT THE SOUTHERN TIP of Vancouver Island, Victoria has its attractions: it's a peaceful, pretty, mid-sized city, famous for its lovely gardens, and it enjoys the mildest climate in Canada. But it's also an out-of-the way place, well removed from the musical capitals of the world. And for the last 20 years, the Lafayette Quartet has been based there, teaching at the university, performing locally and touring internationally. And the players aren't shy to admit that Victoria has changed them. In fact, they're quite proud of it.

'We did a lot more concerts when we were living in Detroit,' admits Hood, 'because we could drive to other cities easily. But we were spread out, and we had to do a lot of commuting just to practise. In Victoria we're all in the same place – and that was a big change.'

'In Victoria, we're free to look into ourselves and create the music we want,' explains Highbaugh Aloni. 'I think we have more freedom to be ourselves than if we were one of several professional quartets in the area.' In Victoria they've also forged links with other musicians in their community, and they play in a local string orchestra called the Galiano Ensemble of Victoria.

'We've all given half our lives to this quartet'

ANN ELLIOTT-GOLDSCHMID

Another Victoria-based musician who has often worked with the Lafayettes is bassist Gary Karr. 'They're a fixture of the community here,' he says. 'And the enthusiasm they've generated is amazing. They've gone into all the schools – I don't think there's a venue in Victoria where they haven't played. They've been able to reach more people than any other cultural entity in town.'

As for the apparent isolation of their home city – off the western edge of the North American continent – they insist that it's simply not an issue. Stanis says: 'I have a colleague who plays in a high-profile piano trio, and she says, "If you're not on the East Coast, no one takes you seriously." But I have not found that.'

ANOTHER NON-ISSUE FOR THE LAFAYETTES IS THE FACT that they're all women. People notice, of course – and some may wonder if, on some level, it matters. In a 1990 review of the quartet at New York's Frick Collection, James Oestreich of the *New York Times* touched on the subject when he felt the quartet was playing a little too loudly for a small room. 'One hopes that the problem was merely scale,' he wrote, 'and that these players, as women, are not tilting at stereotypes; they are far too good and strong to have to worry about that.'

The Lafayettes are quick to point out that they're by no means the only all-female quartet: in the US alone they were preceded by the Primavera Quartet (not defunct), as well as by the Colorado and Cassatt quartets. And they're disinclined to believe that they're tilting at anything. Hood says: 'We've never sat down to rehearse and consciously said, "We have to be careful not to sound like women."'



The quartet
has been based
in Victoria,
British Columbia,
for 20 years

However, there is one gender-related issue that has forced itself upon the Lafayettes, and tested the group's strength. Ten years ago, Highbaugh Aloni was diagnosed with breast cancer. The crisis passed – she's fine now – but it proved to be a defining moment for the quartet.

'It was life-changing,' recalls the cellist. 'I was a young mother, and my child was just starting kindergarten. I think it changed me as a player – and the reaction of the quartet changed how I felt about being in the group. At that time, we were the first all-female quartet invited to play in a Beethoven cycle in Berlin. My surgery was due to happen right before we were to go. I thought maybe I'd be okay for the trip, but I was looking at the possibility of more surgery. And that's when they all said, "Let's just not go."' 'We were strongly urged to get another cellist,' says Elliott-Goldschmid. 'But we said no.'

This harrowing experience inspired the Lafayettes to start their Health Awareness Forum in 2006. It's a free annual event at the university, where they play a short concert and invite a panel of medical specialists to speak on a chosen health topic. (This year's topic is mental health.) It's free, and its purpose is to raise awareness about advances in treatments.

THE BIG QUESTION, HOWEVER, IS HOW THE LAFAYETTES have managed to stay together, without a single personnel change, for 25 years. We know part of the answer already. Dubinsky's influence and support, right from the start, was a source of strength and unity. And the quartet's two-decade residency at the University of Victoria has provided the players with a stable and close-knit working environment.

Also contributing to the Lafayettes' cohesion was the generosity of another Canadian teaching institution. In 1992 the University of Saskatchewan lent the quartet a set of Amati instruments for a five-year period. (The instruments are now in the hands of the university's own Amati Quartet.) 'It was a great education,' says Stanis, 'because the instruments were matched in a special way – and none of us had experience with instruments of that character. Afterwards, it encouraged each

one of us to seek out a special instrument that would work well in the quartet.'

But even with all the support and opportunities in the world, a quartet's longevity is ultimately founded on its own internal chemistry. And according to Elliott-Goldschmid, communication is a key factor. 'Looking back on it,' observes the violinist, 'we went through phases, like any relationship. As we went through them, we learnt how to make music better, how to communicate, how to support each other. I brought my style of arguing to the quartet from what I'd learnt as a kid, and so did everyone else. We went from unhealthy things to more healthy things. When I see other chamber groups, I'm sometimes amazed at how people treat each other. We can be intense, but we've developed open, communicative and respectful ways of dealing with each other – most of the time!'

So what's next for the Lafayette Quartet, as it enters its second quarter-century? Even after 25 years, the players don't lack fresh ideas. Hood wants to play full Shostakovich and Bartók cycles. Stanis wants to commission more new works. Highbaugh Aloni points out that they've yet to play much Schumann.

Elliott-Goldschmid says: 'We're working with more and more wonderful composers all the time. But I'm also very interested in continuing to delve into the great literature. There's just so much of it that we haven't really done – Dvořák and Schubert, for instance. It's endless, and we've only scratched the surface.' ■

LAFAYETTE QUARTET ON DISC

**Adaskin: String Quartets
nos.1 and 2**
ADLAR MM 101

**Adaskin: Octet for strings;
String Quintet
With Cuarteto
Latinoamericano, Gary Karr
(double bass)**
ADLAR MM 103

Borodin: String Quartet no.2
**Stravinsky: Three Pieces for
String Quartet**
**Shostakovich: String
Quartet no.3**
DORIAN DOR-90203
Burke: String Quartet
CENTREDISCS CMCCD 10104

**Schubert: String Quartet in
D minor, D810 (Death and
the Maiden)**

**Fanny Mendelssohn: String
Quartet in E flat major**
**Rebecca Clarke: Poem for
string quartet**
CBC RECORDS MVCD 1149

Grieg: String Quartet
Debussy: String Quartet
LSQ 005

**Dvořák: Piano Quintets in
A major, opp. 5 and 81**
With Antonín Kubalek (piano)
DORIAN DOR-90221

**Tchaikovsky: String Quartet
no.1 in D major**
**Shostakovich: Preludes
and Fugues nos.1 and 15**
(arr. Dubinsky)
**Shostakovich: String
Quartet no.8**
DORIAN DOR-90163