

Born Anew—A Conversation with Brian Manker of the New Orford String Quartet



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It was tempting to work something into the title of this feature about the phoenix rising from the ashes, but I decided that wouldn't be fair either to the original Orford String Quartet, which ceased to exist in 1991 after more than a quarter century before the public, or to the New Orford String Quartet, which has taken the same name but with a member roster that is completely reconstituted. Established as recently as 2009, the new ensemble is composed of present or former first-desk players from the Montreal and Toronto symphonies: Jonathan Crow and Andrew Wan, violins; Eric Nowlin, viola; and Brian Manker, cello.

It was in conjunction with getting to review the group's debut recording for Bridge—Beethoven's F Major, op. 135, and Schubert's G Major, D 887 (op. 161)—that I got to interview the group's cellist, Brian Manker.

Q: I remember—it must have been back in the 1980s—collecting a complete Beethoven quartet cycle—or maybe it was nearly complete—with your namesake, the Orford String Quartet, on the Delos label, if I recall correctly. Eventually, I parted with those CDs, not because the performances were flawed in any way, but because of the god-awful cavernous reverberation of those Delos recordings. Anyway, I'm just wondering why you chose to hitch your wagon, so to speak, to an ensemble that's been extinct for 20 years? You could have called yourselves the M&Ts (for Montreal and Toronto) Quartet, or anything of your choosing. Why the New Orford? Is there any connection with the old one?

A: I remember those old Orford Beethoven recordings, and I thought they were very good! Lots of the early digital era recordings were very reverberant; the style of the times, I suppose. The original Orford Quartet disbanded in 1991 after a long and illustrious international career. They were founded at the Orford Festival. The previous artistic director of the festival had the idea of sponsoring a new quartet, and approached Jonathan Crow with the idea, setting in motion a chain of events that led up to our first concert at Orford in 2009, just like the previous quartet 44 years previously, and eventually to this new recording. All this is to say that although there is no direct

connection with the original Orford Quartet, we were planted in the same soil as the original group, so to speak. The subject of the name seemed obvious to all of us at the time. We did contact the original members of the Orford Quartet, and they were happy to see us continue the tradition of the group and gave us their blessing. Jonathan and I have both performed with Andrew Dawes. We know Marcel St. Cyr as a colleague; he's been coaching chamber music here in Montreal at McGill for a long time and just retired recently. I know Terence Helmer, and in fact I expect I will see him next week. Sadly, I never had a chance to meet Kenneth Perkins before he died in 2000.

Q: How did it come about that the four of you met and decided to form a string quartet?

A: Jonathan and I were in the Montreal Symphony together for a number of years. We've played quite a bit of chamber music together and the Brahms Double Concerto as well. We've always had a very easy time playing together. When Jonathan was asked to put together a new quartet for Orford, he called me first, which made me very, very happy! Together we decided that Andrew Wan would be a great and equal partner in the group. Andrew knew Eric from Juilliard and recommended him very highly, and with reason—he's an amazing violist! The chemistry in the group was obvious right from the first rehearsal.

Q: This may be a loaded question, but it has always seemed a bit surprising to me that with so many outstanding new string quartet ensembles sprouting like wild flowers all over the U.S. and Europe these days, I wonder why there hasn't been comparable activity on the Canadian front? You've produced quite a few outstanding violin soloists like James Ehnes, Leila Josefowicz, and Lara St. John, but when it comes to quartets, only a couple of names come to mind, the St. Lawrence and the Toronto Quartets. But neither is of recent vintage. In fact the Toronto ensemble was established in 1884. So do you feel that in forming a new string quartet, you're filling a gap in Canada's cultural scene?

A: Ha! No, I don't think so. We see ourselves as representatives of the high musical performance standard that exists in Canada, and as ambassadors for Canadian music, which is sometimes not very well known outside of Canada.

Q: For those of you who are still active in one or the other of the two orchestras, how do you manage to balance that against rehearsal and performance schedules of the quartet? If the quartet really takes off, will that become the full-time occupation for all of you?

A: In fact, Jonathan Crow has just been named the new concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony, so all four of us are now evenly divided between the Montreal and Toronto Symphonies! We have the two fine, young, and charismatic concertmasters of the two finest orchestras in the country, orchestras with an international reputation. At this point we have something like 25 concerts in the next year as a quartet. I have to say that we feel that the older model of the full-time string quartet is not for us at this point. For myself, I feel strongly that I am a musician first, and that doing all these different kinds of things like playing in the orchestra, playing concertos, playing solo Bach, recitals, teaching, etc. helps me to bring more depth to the quartet, and we're all doing these other enriching things. Our approach thus far has been to set aside blocks of time that are dedicated to the quartet. During these periods we dig deeply into whatever we're playing; it's fresh and not the stale product of routine. If the quartet takes off, would we give up our positions? I'm not sure. I think there are

some benefits artistically to our situation. The reality of being on the road for a hundred days a year may happen in the future, but for now we're happy. Time will tell, I suppose.

Q: It was an interesting idea for your first CD to pair Beethoven's last string quartet (not counting the substitute finale he wrote for op. 130 to replace the Grosse Fuge) with Schubert's last effort in the medium. Despite both works being "lasts," they're so completely different—Beethoven's, for the most part, an almost frivolous musical joke, a flippant "ta-ta" exit stage left; Schubert's, a tortured, some might even say embittered, leave-taking note filled with spleen over his thankless life. How did you decide to marry this odd couple?

A: It is an odd pairing, but they were written within months of each other in the same city, so perhaps they belong together more than any other pair of works by these two composers! The Beethoven is enigmatic in so many ways. Is it serious or is it light? I find it deeply profound and human in its heavy-lightness. As usual for Beethoven, there are thematic relations that are not clear on the surface, but the linkage between the Vivace, the Lento, and the last Allegro are clear if one studies the work carefully, and these links profoundly affect one's view of the work. The Schubert is darkly radiant. There are moments in it where the tragic sense is so clear and deep that all one can say is "poor Schubert." His narratives are different from Beethoven's; they seem to refer to the past constantly, while Beethoven is predominantly in the present and driving toward the future. On the subject of why this particular pairing, it was simply what engaged our imagination. Whether or not anyone else felt it was a good pairing, or that putting another recording of these works in the catalog was necessary, it was what engaged us and because of that we put all our passion and energy into these two works. Stubborn, I suppose, but I always feel that happy musicians produce the best results, either on stage or in the studio.

Q: Yes, the Beethoven is enigmatic. I like your description of it as deeply profound and human in its "heavy-lightness." The first movement is so bizarre—the sudden stops and starts and veering away from expected cadential progressions. And then there's that argumentative development section, which I once said reminded me of washerwomen squabbling over a backyard fence. You take the tempo a bit slower than other ensembles I've heard, but it allows you to separate out the strands of the spat so clearly; and you, in particular really spit out those cello interjections with such splenetic bite. Then there's that queer little Scherzo. It trips along so lighthearted and undisturbed until—what is that?—some dark specter that casts a momentary pall over the proceedings? Or is it just Beethoven's attempt at a joke that falls flat on its face? For me, though, it's the incomparably sublime Lento with those unresolved suspensions toward the end that repeat over and over again, as if in search of a final resting place and the sense of utter calm, peace, and release when the destination is reached. In contrast, you call the Schubert "darkly radiant." I think I'd just call it dark. The more Schubert I listen to—and not just late Schubert—the more convinced I become of what a tortured soul he was. His music is filled with such really black and scary visions. I just reviewed another recording of the G-Major Quartet in a prior issue, where I spoke to its unsettling departures from harmonic stability, rhythmic predictability, and textural congruity; its angst-ridden first movement riddled with eruptive tremolos, slashing chords, and disruptive modal and tonal shifts; and its doleful slow movement, like a funeral march where the pallbearers lose their footing on that slippery F in measure 33, threatening to hurl casket and corpse to the ground. I think no composer more than Schubert presages Mahler. After all is said and done, Beethoven, I think, left the stage

with a tip of his hat and a “ta-ta,” while Schubert went out with a hideous, contorted grimace. I realize that was quite a mouthful and I’m supposed to be interviewing you, but do you have any additional thoughts to add to this?

A: The first movement of the Beethoven certainly captures very well Goethe’s description of a string quartet as being a “conversation between four reasonable people.” All in all, a very polite, domestic conversation it is! In the second movement the funny interruption you’re referring to may be intending to recall a similar interruption near the end of the first movement on the same note (E). It may also be looking forward to the last movement and be a kind of playful joke on the meaning of muss es sein . In German, “es” is also the name for the note E , and it’s certainly within the realm of possibility that Beethoven is having fun with the cosmic ambiguity of “muss es sein.” In the Lento, Beethoven shows that he is not only a master of musical time in a forward-moving sense. This is a time-stopping movement, where in the final pages Beethoven magically slows down the clock until we approach eternity. The “Heiliger Dankgesang” in op. 132 is trying to achieve the same kind of suspension of the arrow of time. I actually find the last movement to be very profound, not a simple joke. In my view it is so profound that it is able to contain inside it the “tip of the hat” you refer to, as well as utopian visions and the grinding, hellish music of the second statement of the Grave introduction. For me, the Schubert has radiance in many places that are meant to relate to each other on the level of memory. What about the first tremolando passage in which the first violin intimately confesses to us all? This is radiant! I feel that throughout the work the major-key, lyrical episodes that culminate in the trio are all somehow meant to recall the same scene of warmth and bliss. There is nostalgia in these passages. Major-key lyricism in the G-Major quartet is part of a radiant and sweet past. Minor is referencing a dark and troubled present and an even darker future. The loud outburst that for you evokes pallbearers in the slow movement, for me clearly recalls the quasi-Baroque gestures of the opening of the first movement, where minor rears up and shatters major. Even in the first measures of the skipping finale, a shadow flits across the scene, out of focus and vague. There is something of the Erlkönig lurking in the dark corners of this music.

Q: Well, you’ve certainly described quite vividly and effectively the profound ambivalence that characterizes Schubert’s music. I’ve always felt that of all the great composers, he is the most difficult to understand and the one whose music communicates some of the scariest visions. It’s not just in the way he plays minor against major in adjacent phrases—Mozart and Beethoven do that, too—but in the way he will often undermine a sweet, innocent-sounding tune with a bitter harmonic twist. I’ve referred to it as “curdling the milk.” Anyway, moving on, do you foresee a complete Beethoven cycle with each quartet paired with one by Schubert? That would be fascinating. Most of Schubert’s early quartets date from a five-year period between 1811 and 1816, by which time Beethoven had completed all but his five late quartets and had taken a 15-year sabbatical from quartet writing. In other words, Beethoven had finished his op. 18 set, the three “Rasoumovsky s ,” the “Harp,” and the “Serioso,” all before Schubert even thought of writing a string quartet. And yet, some of those early Schubert quartets are so beautiful and, in some cases, so extraordinarily strange—and they’re not all that often recorded or programmed in concert—wouldn’t it be interesting to pair one or more of the early Schuberts with one of the middle Beethovens, and then one of the late Schuberts, like you do on your debut recording, with one of the late Beethovens?

A: You are very perceptive! That has been discussed; I’m not sure whether that’s the direction we’ll

go in. One problem with a Schubert/Beethoven cycle is that even the relatively light op.18 quartets seem very heavy in relation to many of the early and relatively immature Schubert works; Beethoven just takes up too much room! This idea would work well with the "Rosamunde" and "Death and the Maiden" quartets and a middle or late Beethoven quartet. In fact, weren't Beethoven's op.127 and "Death and the Maiden" written in the same year? Another possible pairing that has my attention at the moment is Beethoven's op. 130 (with the Grosse Fuge) and Berg's Lyric Suite . Two six-movement works written exactly 100 years apart. I've always had the feeling they belong together; now I have to convince everyone else! We've talked about a disc of Russian repertoire, or Canadian works. There are so many interesting possibilities!

Q: Yes, for sure you're right about the early Schuberts vs. the early Beethovens. As an amateur violinist myself, I've played in a string quartet that read through the Schuberts and made a stab at reading through the op. 18 Beethovens, and I can vouch for the fact that the early Schuberts, technically, at least, are child's play compared to the Beethovens. In fact, I've now been told by the members of two professional string quartets that they consider the op. 18 quartets to be even more difficult technically than the middle and late quartets. To an amateur like myself, they all seem equally daunting, but you're right that the early Schuberts, interesting as they are, would not be satisfying makeweights for Beethoven's op. 18. When you mentioned the Grosse Fuge , you inadvertently pushed one of my hot buttons. I've written a number of reviews and engaged in a number of debates regarding this movement, arguing with unwavering passion that the alternate ending Beethoven supplied is a throwaway and that the Grosse Fuge is the only legitimate ending to the op. 130 Quartet. So if you do go on to record op. 130, please tell me that the Grosse Fuge will come immediately after the Cavatina on the disc, and that if you do include the alternate ending, it will be relegated to an appendix at the end. Surveying recordings of the quartets made in the last dozen years or so, I find that most ensembles have in fact come around to this way of thinking. What are your thoughts on the subject?

A: I agree completely with you about the Grosse Fuge belonging as the finale of op. 130, although I also adore the other finale and find it to be much more than a throwaway by Beethoven! The problem in performing any complete Beethoven cycle is always what to do with these two finales. On a recording, it's simple—just include both finales and let the listener shuffle them around if he wants to hear the difference.

Q: Yes, absolutely, but put the Grosse Fuge first so that the listener doesn't have to program his CD player to skip over the alternate finale or reach for the remote to skip to the next track. With most recordings these days of "early" music—according to which definition some include Beethoven, Schubert, and beyond—being done using period instruments, it really can't be called a movement anymore. It has become so mainstream that it's now the norm for virtually any pre-19th-century music to be taken up exclusively by the period-instrument bands. Just try to find a new recording, for example, of a Handel or Vivaldi opera not performed on period instruments. Of course the players have gotten so good that sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. But our readers always take an interest in the instruments used in performances. So, I will ask you about the instruments you and your fellow members of the New Orford Quartet play. Any special pedigrees? What about attempts to match voices for ensemble playing?

A: Let's see, Jonathan is playing on a beautiful Sanctus Seraphim violin, Andrew on a fine Michelangelo Bergonzi that the philanthropist David Sela has provided for him. Eric was playing on a Goffriller viola but is now playing a more recent instrument made by Giovanni Pistucci. My cello was made by Sam Zygmuntowicz in 2005. I actually commissioned this cello thinking it would be a stable second instrument to the Lorenzo Ventapane cello I was playing for years. In any event, I found Sam's cello to be so exceptional that I stopped playing the old Italian cello and eventually sold it! As for attempts to match instruments, it seems clear that changing just one instrument can radically change the basic sound of a quartet, but I feel that the players really make the match work regardless of the equipment. So much has to do with how one uses the bow and vibrato, and intonation is a crucial part of achieving a beautiful, blended sonority.

Q: Oh, you've uttered the magic—in some quarters, four-letter—word, "vibrato." The subject has taken on such controversy lately, with some claiming it was not used continuously, persistently, and relentlessly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the way it came to be in modern times. Of course, we know from some period-instrument performances what string tone can sound like when vibrato is virtually shunned—like a vampire's victim drained of blood. What's your take on the matter?

A: Vibrato is an extremely controversial issue; its use is very personal and subjective. I feel vibrato has a few easily defined functions. Firstly, it can be used for projection; it separates one's sound from the other sounds around it by creating an oscillation that tends to be in opposition to the other instruments. Vibrato separates different sounds, rather than blending them, which is why it is so important in solo playing with a large ensemble. Vibrato is also an expressive tool that represents the inner feeling of a note or passage; it can increase or decrease to show the intensity of a phrase. Vibrato can be used structurally, as a kind of color effect to separate one passage from another, almost like orchestrating with a different set of instruments. The list goes on and on. In a way, one can think of musical interpretation as being like decorating a room. If you think of a room from ancient Rome, it has four walls and a ceiling, much like this room I'm sitting in right now. What makes it different from the room I'm in is the materials and the way it is decorated or ornamented. Vibrato is an ornament that helps to define the style of a performer or historical period, a decoration if you will. Different performers will decorate the same structure differently, according to their taste.