

Interview with J. Moerschel of the Calder Quartet

03/18/2010



J. Moerschel (© Tyler Boye)

Tradition and the String Quartet in the 21st century

Introduction:

Violist Jonathan Moerschel and the Calder Quartet recently played the music of Peter Eötvös in the Green Umbrella series at Disney Hall in Los Angeles, as well as with the indie rock band The Airborne Toxic Event at the LA Philharmonic's West Coast Left Coast Festival. They tour extensively, collaborating with contemporary composers including Thomas Adès, Terry Riley and Christopher Rouse. Their performances and recordings of Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and Bartok have also been extensively praised. In this wide-ranging conversation Jonathan talks about these subjects, and also about working with Czech music and film star Iva Bittova and party rocker Andrew W. K. at (Le) Poisson Rouge in New

[Hire Wedding Musicians](#)

World Class Home Entertainment on Offer. Call or Email Us Today!
www.OneToOneServices.com

[Wedding String Quartet](#)

Live classical music for ceremony & reception in NJ. Free consultation.
www.AmbassadorStrings.com

[String Music for Weddings](#)

String Quartet wedding ceremony music. Beautiful classical and pop
www.bianchimusica.com

[Mozart Opera Manuscripts](#)

Full-size, Color Facsimiles of Mozart's Autograph Manuscripts
mozart.packhum.org

York. He describes the quartet's training with the renowned chamber music professor Eberhard Feltz in Berlin, and their founding of the Carlsbad Music Festival with composer Matt Mcbane. His views on the string quartet in the 21st century are intriguing.

Thomas Aujero Small: I want to get right into this... How do you see these latest developments between more traditional classical music and the popular strains of music: "crossover"... How do you see this, how do you participate in it?

Jonathan Moerschel: I think it all stems out of trying to increase audiences. Everyone who is doing the crossover thing is doing it not only because they enjoy the different aspects and types of music but they are also asking: how do we get more of the popular audience into the classical music world?

TS: But you guys are doing very differently than Andrea Bocelli or even Yo-Yo Ma...

JM: Well, we are doing it the way we are doing it because we've seen people play these shows in less traditional venues, like playing in a coffee house. You can play Bach Suites in a coffee house. But to us, why do that? Just putting random music in a coffee house that doesn't really say much to us... What's the point? We like coming up with a program that is specific to a venue. At Le Poisson Rouge in New York it would not make sense for us to play Beethoven quartets or Haydn or Mozart because that's just not the kind of people the venue is going to draw. Why would someone want to come there to hear us play Beethoven, Haydn or Mozart when they can come to Zipper Hall or Alice Tully? So why not put together a program that is going to appeal to the audience to make them want to come in and hear it in a particular kind of venue. So in putting together the Andrew W.K. Tour, our question was: how do we bridge this gap between classical contemporary and the craziness that is Andrew W. K.?

With party rocker, Andrew W. K. at Le Poisson Rouge...

TS: So how did that happen, how did you guys get involved with Andrew W. K. Tell me a little bit about him...

JM: Well, Andrew's manager is also the manager for the

band The Airborne Toxic Event. This guy Pete Galli is visionary. His mind works so fast you just can't keep up with him. When he talks he speaks so quickly because he is always generating ideas. We'd heard about Andrew and watched some of his YouTube videos and I always thought: he's just crazy. He obviously operated in a similarly very fast plane. The way he improvised, he would take a Bach Suite or a Prelude and Fugue and would improvise on it and put every ounce of energy he had into it. He was not afraid of making a fool of himself. So part of him is the artistic process but also he's about entertaining at the same time. He came out with this party rock album about ten years ago. I think he was 21 and he sold 500,000 copies of the cd.

He had his own show on MTV. Then he just changed gears. He had been touring a lot and he just got really tired. So he got into motivational speaking. He now has another TV show. He's really branching out and doing a lot of different things. It was his manager's idea that we might want to do something with him. So we had this opportunity to play at Le Poisson Rouge so we asked Andrew to play with us. And then it was... what are we going to do? So we had a couple of phone meetings. And we got together a week before.

We had some ideas for contemporary music: we played Philip Glass' *Quartet No. 2* and a piece written for us by Christine Southworth that was originally written for Quartet and robot. We did four of the party rock songs from his album, and we finished with John Cage's 4' 33". Because we did these four songs that were just crazy, by the end of the last song (which is called *Dance Party*) practically everyone in the audience was on stage dancing like crazy. So that stops and he says: Hey you guys want to hear another one? The audience responded: Yeah!!! So he says: Well this one's by John Cage. He puts the piano lid down and there's silence... And we had the movements; we tried to do it exactly the way the premiere was done. To us it was a really serious thing.

Our idea was: what can you do after this craziness that is Andrew W.K. and what he does? You have to have the opposite. You have to do something that will give everyone a chance to reflect on what has happened. And we had no idea what was going to happen. We thought this was a trial run, but we had no idea. It was a total success. We got a review in the Heavy Metal magazine called Metal Edge saying it was "strange as hell but it pretty much ruled." So that was kind of a turning point because in my mind I was really doubtful. I was thinking: is this really going to work? Are people really going to like it? But we had a total eclectic mix of people at that show. There were clearly a lot of fans of Andrew's who were our age and younger. And then there were a lot of

middle aged and older people there who didn't know. They just said there was a classical quartet and someone named Andrew W.K.

Even though they were not sure that they liked it, it was so interesting that they liked it. Maybe they didn't like the music but they liked the performance. That was the reaction to the tour that we did together; it was like the audience was saying, "I have no idea what just happened but I loved it." Every moment you had no idea what to expect and it was the same for us. Which I think made it especially interesting.

Working with Andrew, we had no idea what he was going to do next. At one show he actually climbed inside the piano. He was lying inside the grand piano and was strumming it while he was singing. We were playing at a venue in New York. They had treated us badly. He got annoyed because people were eating their meals and being really loud. So it he reached down and picked up somebody's dinner plate and took his microphone and rubbed it in it, he was just so mad at the way we were being treated. He took their wine glass and turned around and put it on the piano bench and pretended to pee in it. Every night was something totally different. To him it was just a performance experience. He kept saying to the audience that this was a journey, an experiment for all of us.

TS: With Andrew W.K. what do you play and what does he play?

JM: Andrew can read music but he prefers not. So, what he'll do with a piece that he has to learn is that he will learn it from the music but never perform it with the music. He will have a cue sheet. For the piece that was written for robot, we decided to not do it with a robot. So we thought: let's have Andrew improvise the part of the robot. We just told him that the robot does 'this' at around this time. So then he would improvise. The Philip Glass quartet is seven minutes long. It's called *Company*. It's incidental music to a Beckett play that is centered on a minor key. So we played the piece and he just emerged out of that, playing something similar and then began to move into his improvisation. He would also play spontaneous solo piano improvisations. Other times it was improvising music on top of something that was written for us. Occasionally he would decide to do a solo song or something else.

TS: So you guys are not improvising?

JM: There is a certain amount of improvising. We wrote arrangements for some of his songs. We put together and organized the improvisation for the LPR show with Andrew last year. We were not that comfortable just spontaneously improvising, totally free form, like he was. So we came up with a tone cluster and said that we would improvise around that, and then have a couple of events. It ended up being a three-minute improv jam. Since then, working with Fred Smith, we've gotten a little bit more comfortable. A lot of it was sort of organized chaos.

At other times, it was really important to stick to the score. Andrew was adamant that the composers that we were playing, that their music was represented genuinely and honestly. He didn't want to fool around with that. Everything was serious, including his improvisations. That was him in being himself, and genuine. And he didn't want to screw with music that was written for us for the sake of entertainment. He was always adamant that it had to be about the art.

The Calder Quartet and The Airborne Toxic Event

In that way, working with Airborne (Toxic Event) was the same thing. We got started working with Airborne before Andrew W.K. because the violist in Airborne is our violinist Andrew Bulbrook's sister. They suggested that it would be great to have a quartet playing on this one particular song. They were playing on the radio and were playing a show at the El Rey Theater. They were promoting their first album and touring a lot. They thought it would be great to have us play with them, and that it would be a lot of fun.

So they wrote the arrangements and we did a radio show with them on KCRW's "Morning Becomes Eclectic" and then we did the El Rey Theater show with them. It was totally packed. It was crazy. That was definitely a little bit outside our comfort zone. I had never been to a rock concert before. That was a really special thing, and almost more so for them, for the band, that the first time that I had ever been to a rock show I was playing with them. I had never been to a rock show. There are bands that I had always wanted to hear. But part of me was really afraid of going to a show that big, where there are a zillion people.

TS: Was your first experience working with the band like that? How did you figure out how to work together?

JM: Well, I hoped that it would not just be: we will play this song and then you play it back to us. But in fact they actually had arrangements. Several of them were actually classically trained. So there was definitely an ability to communicate. They are just really great people. They really wanted us to preserve the fact that we are a string quartet. They have been and remain very respectful of our skills as a quartet, and as classical players. They didn't want us to be rock players. They give us full credit on every show that we do with them, as the Calder Quartet. We played the nighttime talk shows, Leno and Letterman and Kimmel with them. When the host announced us, our name was always up there with them. For us on a career level, that was amazing publicity.

TS: But for them, it's been the same thing in a very different arena. Some people say that Airborne was invited to play in Disney Hall because of the Calder Quartet.

JM: I think that there is probably some legitimacy to that. I mean the people at the LA Philharmonic know us. We've played their festivals before. And I think in Disney Hall, you can't just play rock, a traditional rock show. The acoustic won't allow it. They had to totally rethink the way they do it, because their shows primary are all electric. Occasionally they'll do an acoustic set somewhere. But the shows that they're known for are rock shows. We've never played an acoustic set with them. We did two music videos with them.

Up until the Friday before the concert, we had done three songs with them. In that show we did eight songs. So we had to do five new arrangements. Even when those arrangements were done, we totally re-did them once we started rehearsal. Because there was less electric, you had to have more focus on the strings because of the acoustic. We actually rehearsed in Zipper Hall up until the Friday night of the concert. Because it's such a live acoustic, you can't have the same kind of noise. For instance, the drummer didn't use sticks at all. He used mostly brushes. He used a much softer sound than normal, a lot less cymbal. He just had a tom-tom, a snare, a high hat, maybe one cymbal, and the bass drum. That was it. Normally, he's got a full set. The guitarists used acoustic guitars for the first half, but with a microphone. And then in the second half they switched to electric guitars. We used 'clip on' microphones with really small condensers, placed right next to the bridge. We tried several different things but it's difficult because we have really valuable instruments. I wasn't using my really good instrument; I was using my good instrument. It's actually really hard to get a good amplified sound on a totally acoustical instrument.

TS: So the pickup is different from what there is on an electric instrument?

JM: The pickup on an electric instrument is what I believe they call a piezo pickup, which only responds to vibration and converts it to a digital signal. This creates a digital sound, a very shallow and generally bright sound, very metallic compared to an acoustical instrument. But it has total sound isolation, so you don't get any noise from the other players on the stage. This is great when you're using a lot of electric. You can really crank up the sound. But you have no control over sound quality, or almost no control. Even with a really good sound engineer, it's really hard. All of the TV shows that we did with them, and most of the rock clubs, were done with this type of pickup. It's a totally different sound.

We really do miss the quartet sound, that acoustic quality. Using the other system, with a microphone you can actually get the acoustic quality of the wood instrument. These mikes are pretty good. They are directional, so you do get some sound isolation. If you try to crank them up too much, it creates feedback. But in terms of sound quality is no comparison. Each instrument responds differently. You have to put the microphone in a slightly different place.

It's interesting playing with the band because it's a totally different from what we are used to. Even just playing in the concert hall with all of those fans. I've never gotten nervous playing an Airborne concert because it's just different. I can't put my finger on it. You don't feel so naked. But also people are not listening for correct notes and perfect rhythm.

TS: Is there an overall experience that they are looking for?

JM: Exactly, somehow I find that totally freeing. And I don't think I would be happy doing just one thing or the other. It reminds us to not take ourselves so seriously. It adds a certain element to the way we perceive ourselves. It adds an element to the way perform classical music as well. It can really help. It's no wonder that younger people have the impression that classical music and chamber music is stuffy. Because it is, when it is presented in that way. And that brings us back to why we did the shows with Andrew W.K.

Working with the Czech star, Iva Bittova...

TS: Tell me about your collaborations with Iva Bittova.

JM: She's a Czech singer and violinist and a movie and television star in the Czech Republic.

TS: How did you find her?

JM: It started off because we paid this piece by Fred Frith who is a composer at Mills College and experimental guitarist. He wrote a string quartet called *Lelekovice*, the only one he has written so far. He wrote this for it Iva Bittova, when he was visiting her, and afterward he stayed a while in her hometown. We love Fred's music, and we thought this piece was really interesting. In the meantime Terry Riley's manager Tom Welsh is a good friend of ours. He said you guys really ought to get to know Iva. She's really awesome; she does these great shows. She would really be right up your alley, especially since you play Fred's quartet. So we called her and said we would really love to do a show with you. Would you be interested? She was all for it.

So this opportunity came up at Le Poisson Rouge. They seem to trust us to put together a really good show. After we did the show with Andrew W.K., Ronan, who runs the Wordless Music Series in New York, said it was one of the best shows he's ever presented. Having that under our belt helped. So we said we'd really like to do the show with Iva. Everyone was all for it. So we scheduled it. Then we said: well great, now what we can to do? It was kind of like how we began with Andrew W.K. We decided we were going to do it. Then we had to come up with something to do. How can we present what she does and what we do and make it into a single program... so that it's not like her and us separately, but all of us together?

So we did a show featuring Janáček songs, as well as some music that was written for the show. And we played Fred Frith's quartet. So we were able to put together a program that was all Czech, folk infused music. It was one evening, and basically one big piece. Iva would improvise between the separate pieces to make it flow. I think people enjoyed seeing the relationship between pop music and classical music or folk music. I mean it's really all music. We were trying to get the same emotions across, with slightly different characters. We are all trying to do the same thing. I think people are starting to realize that they can appreciate music from all these different viewpoints. It is ok to have them all together because we are all trying to say the same thing.

I think the key is to make sure that your sonic creation is specific to a venue and is appropriate to that venue. That has been the key to some of our success, realizing how important that is. You can't just put anything in a coffee shop or a club or an art gallery. How are they going to perceive it, what kind of experience are they going to have? I think that was a changing point in all of our programming. The most successful programming for us has been when the audience can be taken on a journey from one end of the program to the other. Our traditional thinking had always been: well, we'll have three quartets on a program and maybe the middle quartet is going to be something new, and that's it. I don't know when it was or what it was that spawned the new way of thinking for us. But this is what we take to all of the shows we do now. What is this program saying and what kind of journey are we going on?

TS: You do this same kind of thing in your straight classical concerts now?

JM: That's the reasons that one of our recent concerts started with the Frith quartet. We actually went in reverse chronological order. We began with a piece by a British man living in CA, teaching at Mills College, where they are known for having their Avant Garde tendencies. This British composer/guitarist never wrote anything down. Everything was always improvised. His piece is inspired by Czech music, written for a Czech folk musician. The next piece was written by a Czech composer, Janáček, writing about his infatuation, when he was 72, for a 20-year old, inspired by the love letters he wrote. We ended with another Czech composer and his take on Czech folk music, Dvorak. We took the audience on this Czech-infused journey. We went back in time to see how these folk melodies and folk gestures influenced each other. Each piece has these gestures, and is related to the others. So we are hoping that the audience takes that journey, because that is what we take from it.

The Carlsbad Music Festival

TS: Tell me about the Carlsbad Festival?

JM: Carlsbad has been really interesting. It was started by a friend of ours named Matt Mcbane, who went to school with us. He's a composer. He was sort of a surfer who got serious and went into composing. He lives in NY now and has his own band called Build. He and Ben, our first violinist, were roommates in college for and also in NY. They are both from Carlsbad and had the same violin teacher when they were 12 years old. So we thought, well

there is no festival down there and we all like new music. It would be fun to start a festival.

Every musician wants to have his own festival, you know... It turns out to be a lot of work. Its really difficult to keep them going, mostly for financial reasons. The artistic reasons were always there. It started off really small. We had another quartet called the California quartet. So Matt wrote a piece and we did one other new piece and we put some classical stuff on there. We thought it was nice but not quite what we wanted. We needed more of an angle and a little more direction. So gradually it shifted to all new music. One year we decided to do a composition competition. We had something like 60 submissions. Our first winner was a guy named Ryan Carter who I think was at Yale or Stonybrook at the time. He wrote a piece that had some very new techniques for us, having to do with phasing and how that changes your concept of intonation, and believe it or not, tempo and speeds.

TS: What is phasing?

JM: Phasing is when you have two notes that are just slightly out of tune that are really close, you hear beats. The beats have a particular speed depending on how closely those two notes are out of tune with each other. The closer they are- one direction they go faster and the other direction they go slower. I can't remember right now exactly which is which. I remember going to school on the school bus and looking at the windshield wipers and it was mesmerizing how they would be close together and then one would be just a little slower and then they would move apart – well that's phasing. The same thing can happen with notes. So there was one part near the beginning of Ryan's piece where the cello has to play two notes and they are in a minor 2nd. So you have to get just the right amount to create the beating that has to be a certain speed. And then the first violin has to play 16th notes at that speed, which is really hard to do. But that was a whole new technique.

And then he had graphing above, a graphing line that would show how fast or slowly you had to play something, based on the graph. So that was our first piece. We thought: this is really interesting. We heard a lot of interesting music and it was amazing to learn how many fantastic young composers were out there and what interesting things they are doing. So the next year we did it again and had like 100 submissions. We realized that it was getting harder. How were we going to chose who would win...because there was so much great stuff?

We decided to go with somebody whose sound was the most unique. This was Christine Southworth. She submitted a piece when she was in residence at the museum of science in Boston, where they have the country's largest Van de Graf generator. It was a piece called *Zap*. The Van de Graf generator emits these 20-foot long sparks that create minor claps of thunder. She wrote the piece for some arrangement of instruments and this Van de Graf generator.

She also has a group called Ensemble Robot. She and her friends at MIT, some engineers, designed these MIDI [Musical Instrument Digital Interface] controlled robots. Her father was on the team that invented MIDI. So she designed these gigantic robots that are really art pieces in themselves, but they create these beautiful sounds that are all controlled by computer. So she created this piece for us called *Honey Flyers* inspired by honeybees. The robot was called a Boticello, which is basically a one-stringed thing with a flexible arm and a thing that spins around and hits the string. It can control the pitch by moving the arm and also by controlling the speed of the little doohickey that spins around. That piece has been very successful. We have played it a lot. We had it commissioned with the understanding that it could be played with or without robot. We have played it everywhere.

This is our fourth year with the competition. We had one grand prizewinner and also commissioned three short, five-minute pieces. So we had four premieres in one evening. The festival generally takes place over a week and the number of concerts varies. The last couple of years, we've done one big concert in LA at the Colburn School.

The festival always features us as the founding ensemble in residence. Then we have anywhere from one to three other groups. One year we had Red Fish Blue Fish. This year we had the California EAR Unit. Then there was another group called Real Quiet, which is a piano, cello, and percussion group. So it varies. This year we did a show and the CA EAR Unit also did a show, down in Carlsbad. Then we did a show together here in LA. Then Fred Frith had his own show, but he wanted to do a show featuring everyone. So he made up this one long piece that was made up of several of his pieces put together in different orders, with improv in between.

So there have been three concerts in Carlsbad and one in LA, but we may shift that around. There is a strong desire for the music down there but money is always tricky. It's something that we are always working on. We are all professional performers and musicians, so that

takes up a lot of time. But the competition has been tremendously successful. We are very happy with how that has been going.

TS: How is it funded?

JM: Well, box office has been the least amount of funding, unfortunately. Grants have been very important. And the Carlsbad Public Library has hosted us and sponsors us with a pretty sizable grant. We are talking about partnering with the Museum of Making Music down there. They have a really nice museum of musical instruments, and lectures, demonstrations and seminars.

Any way you look at it, it's always a challenge, especially with the director living in NY and us travelling all the time. We are the founding ensemble and Matt is the director. It's been really successful and rewarding but it's always a lot of work. There are always premiers and no matter when you set the commission deadline, there is always something. It's a really great learning experience and it's getting a lot of recognition.

Working with composers Terry Riley and Christopher Rouse...

TS: So tell me about working with Terry Riley and Christopher Rouse.

JM: One of the smart things we did was getting to know Christopher Rouse and playing his music. We met him at Aspen when we were students there. I think at the time we were looking for a composer to play whose music had not been played that much. And Chris has been a resident at Aspen for a number of years now. He had these two quartets that are tremendously difficult and that no one was playing. The first quartet was written in 1980. Then the Cleveland Quartet commissioned the second quartet for their final tour in 1988 and neither of them had been played ever since. He is primarily known for his large-scale ensemble works and percussion pieces. He likes a lot of sound. We thought it would be a great opportunity. We were all at Aspen; we could learn them with him.

It was a really great idea because we've been playing his music ever since. We learned the first and second quartets. Then we learned his small ensemble piece called *Compline*, which is for string quartet, flute, harp and clarinet, like Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro*, the same scoring. Aspen asked us to come back and play in their festival series, to play these three works. They wanted to

celebrate him. So we went back and that was a really celebrated concert. We have been playing his music a lot. The Festival of Ideas and Arts in New Haven asked us to play his music there, as we are one of the few quartets that play his music. We ended up recording it for E1 records a few years ago.

Finally we were able to get Chris to write his third quartet for us. We just got the score for it. It was co-commissioned by Carnegie Hall, the Festival of Arts and Ideas in New Haven, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Chamber Music of America and the La Jolla Chamber Music Society. They were all co-commissioners. So it will be premiered this June in New Haven. They get the world premier and gradually each venue will have its premiere. Carnegie Hall will be the next April. That has been a great learning experience and we have gotten a lot of mileage out of the Rouse.

It was a really strategic career move for us. It is very, very challenging music, although people do tend to like it. His early quartets have a lot of anger. He calls his first quartet 17 minutes of rage. It can never be fast enough and loud enough and scratchy enough. I think he said he was really angry during that period in his life... something about a woman. The second quartet was more Shostakovich-like...

TS: Not without anger either...

JM: Not without anger, but it is in three movements, slow-fast-slow. He dedicated it to the people of the Soviet Union after a visit there. *Compline* is a much happier work, based on his trip to Rome and the bells there. If you've ever been to Rome, you know that you always hear the bells ring at the end of the day there. I had been to Rome twice, once before learning the piece and the second time after learning the piece. He said: well, I wrote this piece after going to Rome and hearing the bells. When I went back to Rome and heard the bells again a couple of years ago, it was the most amazing thing to hear his references. It was so exciting. I thought: it's like *Compline* exactly... I totally understood what he was getting at.

So the third quartet, he has told us, is very ornery. We were wondering what was in store for us. He told us: you guys are in for wave after wave of searing pain. But we got the score and it does not look quite as difficult as he is making it out to be. But he demands a lot of the player, physically, emotionally and technically. So I think he has saved his hardest music for chamber music. Because he thinks that the orchestra just won't have the

time to put into it. While we put hundreds and hundreds of hours into learning his pieces. So that has been a really fruitful relationship.

You ask about Terry Riley. That relationship came about through the LA Philharmonic, when they did the Minimalist Jukebox Festival in 2006. They asked us to play two of Terry's earliest chamber works. One was a string trio that was his master's thesis that had never been performed before. It had just this "chicken scratch" score. I basically rewrote it because I couldn't read it. He could not recall ever having heard the piece and vaguely remembered writing it. Somewhere on his web site it says that the piece is based on some tape loops that he had. But we asked him about tape loops and he didn't remember anything about any tape loops. It's very uncharacteristic of his music now but the LA Philharmonic was interested. They were doing a lot of his music and they wanted to start early.

The other piece was a string quartet that he wrote early on, in 1960, I think. It was based on the foghorns in the San Francisco bay and is very, very, very slow. Just long notes, then a lot of rests, then long notes. It's almost meditative. You have to slow your heart rate down and your breathing down to as slow as possible. After a while you totally forget; your sense of time is totally changed. Everything is so slow and drawn out.

It was a really interesting experience. Again, this was something totally different than any of his writing now. But that developed a really great relationship with Terry. We had of course heard about him and then we had the opportunity to play for him and meet him. So he sent us his music for *Cadenza in the Night Plane*, which is a quartet he wrote for the Kronos. It is one of the many pieces he wrote for the Kronos and probably one of his most famous string quartets. It has four different cadenzas with tuttis in between. It's an amazing piece, fantastic. There is a little bit of improvisation. There is minimalism and some fun solos. So we have played that a lot; played it for him, and worked with him up in Berkeley. So that was really successful and he was really happy with it.

So he sent us another piece called *Mythic Bird Waltz*, which we have played a lot too. It's a shorter, through-composed piece, also with some aspects of minimalism but definitely more in his style. So that has been a really great relationship and hopefully will continue to develop. He has of course had a twenty-five year relationship with Kronos that obviously comes first. I think we are playing a lot of the pieces that Kronos used to play. I don't know how many new pieces they play each year but they tend

to not go back to some of his other pieces.

Terry has been a really great influence on us, in a different way also freeing us from the printed music and always trying to play “correctly”. In his music the notes are all there and the rhythm is there but nothing else – he leaves the rest up to you, generally. If you want to put different dynamics in; if you want to repeat something more than one time; he says, by all means. He wants you to do that. That’s what he’s about.

He wrote a piano quintet and we asked him to play it with us. He said: I can’t do it. He said: I improvise, that’s what I do. I wouldn’t feel comfortable playing with you guys, where you are used to playing the music and I improvise. He did an organ recital. I don’t know if you went to that. He came down months before and worked on the organ from midnight to 6 AM. He invited us to come to his rehearsals. It was too late for me but the other guys stayed all night. They would just lie on the stage at Disney Hall and listen to him practice on the organ. What an interesting person; what he’s done for the music world... Its not often that somebody comes up with something totally new.

Training with chamber music master, Eberhard Feltz...

TS: Historically, who are the musicians you admire, which recordings?

JM: It’s funny because that has actually changed for me a lot in the last few years. I’ve always been into chamber music, except early on when I played the violin. I was really into Heifetz for a long time.

TS: Did you always want to play chamber music?

JM: I started at two years old wanting to play the violin. Then at 16 I said I wanted to play viola, and that was it. My parents were both musicians, so as soon as I had sufficient ability to get through some music, they forced me. I didn’t want to, but they forced me to play chamber music. They would have friends over all the time to read music and they would make me sit in. I didn’t want to do it because I felt like I wasn’t good enough. They would have to stop all the time and point things out, to point me in the right direction. But it was really great experience, starting off really young. That kind of planted the seed. But I was always fascinated with Heifetz.

Michael Raven was my other idol when I was young. But then as I got into chamber music, I got really into the Guarneri Quartet. I think particularly because of their sound, which I thought was amazing. It felt to me that listening to them was like “surround-sound.” It was this warm lush sound that kind of washed over you. It was amazing. They really captured me, both in recordings and live. They would come to Boston every year. Fortunately in Boston I was able to hear the Orion Quartet, the Emerson Quartet... I heard the Juilliard every year. I heard the Juilliard when Robert Mann was playing and I really liked it. Although they didn't play as cleanly or technically well as the Guarneri Quartet, one thing I always admired was that you could always identify them on the radio. They had a very distinctive sound and each individual really kept their personal flair or character, which I felt was really admirable. That made them very unique, especially these days with recordings.

Now I can't tell anybody anymore on the radio. But the Juilliard you could always tell them; the same with the Budapest Quartet. They were another group I came to really like. The last few years I've had an obsession with the Amadeus Quartet and their recordings and videos. That came out of the time we spent in Berlin, studying with this chamber music professor there named Eberhard Feltz. He didn't speak a word of English. We would have five and six hour lessons with him. He was tireless. He would be screaming at us in German. We didn't understand a word of German. We had a translator. We were trying to figure out what he was saying, where we supposed to play.

But it was the kind of training we never got in the US. In the US it was always: ok, the lessons over, you've been here an hour. You go to Eberhard Feltz in Berlin and after an hour you are just warming up. He could work on the same two measures for an hour. But it got us to a certain point, where, of course the technical stuff was important... but what you were saying was so much more important. You could only get to that point by understanding the structure and the harmony. Everything else comes out of that. So we spent a lot of time analyzing the music with him. He would ask us: why did Mozart do this? Why is the scherzo movement before the slow movement? We would go on and on over this material... well, that's one answer what's another?

TS: It's amazing how different that is from playing with Airborne...

JM: Oh, yeah! It is! I think that is what has been so fascinating about our life over these past few years. But in a lot of ways you can see the relationship. It's about

the music, and obviously rhythm and intonation and all that is important. But we are still working with getting the same emotions across...

TS: What a gift for you guys, to have those poles, both kinds of music and both approaches to music...

JM: It is. Having those two things has made us much more well rounded musicians and has made us see things in a totally new way. It has made me appreciate things that musically I don't normally like to listen to. I would say that I am not a fan of country music. But when I listen to country music I can still really appreciate it, I think much more than I used to. I think it has been really important. And the way that I listen to contemporary music now... I think I listen more to the sounds, and not only what I think should be good music. I listen to the sounds and the emotions that it is creating inside me.

Tradition and the 21st century string quartet...

TS: Looking at the publications on your web site, the most impressive thing is that there are these rave reviews from rock magazines and then there is Alan Rich writing about your performance of Mozart. Your performance made him hear that piece in a way he had never heard it before, when it has been his favorite piece for sixty years...

JM: I think that playing with all these people and playing all these different kinds of music has consciously and subconsciously affected us in the way we play everything. There is a certain crowd that plays the New York style of music, such as the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center or other groups that are really successful in NY. There is a certain aesthetic that they are looking for and it is just not us. So we have never been very successful in those types of places.

TS: But Le Poisson Rouge is the pinnacle of NY right now...

JM: But it's different... Yeah, we are very successful there, but that's really different from Lincoln Center and the competitions and all that stuff. I think it is because we are not following that same tradition; we are not playing it the same way everyone else does. It's not that we are consciously trying to be different, but that is just the way we do it. That is what makes us happy. That is what makes sense to us with the direction that we are

going. It does not have to be that way, that old tradition. It doesn't have to be: this is classical music; that is contemporary music; that's pop music, that's jazz... that's minimalist, or whatever... It is all music.

TS: Well, we have been patting ourselves on the back here a lot in LA over the last few years...

JM: And I think rightly so!

TS: I do think rightly so, but you hear more about the young "uber-musician" in NY, who will play a jazz club tonight and then Lincoln Center tomorrow and then something else the next day... composers like Nico Muhly and those kind of musicians... You don't hear as much about that here in LA, but you guys are doing that here.

JM: Yeah, in that way I think LA is actually much more progressive and that it is much safer to do that. I think in NY there are these areas where you can do it, like LPR and the Wordless Music series that are all about that. But the Wordless Music Series is the series to be on in NY.

TS: But we don't have an LPR here yet.

JM: Not yet, but that is LA music. With Carlsbad we are trying to figure out where is LPR here in LA that we can play at... that kind of place is where would like to be doing our shows.

TS: The Pacifica Quartet is taking over the series at the Metropolitan Museum... I suppose that is a traditional venue...

JM: It's very traditional, the Emerson, the Guarneri, the Orion, the Tokyo, and they all play beautifully but that is that little box and that is where it is going to stay... If you don't fit into that you're not going to be successful in those venues, at least right now. I think that is what Alan Rich is getting at when he talks about hearing us play Mozart; that it doesn't sound like that. I remember years ago, that people said that when they heard us play it reminded them of hearing the Budapest Quartet. I think there is a certain sound that the Budapest had that is not the aesthetic now, not the aesthetic that people look for when they hear a string quartet now. I think that is why we have been successful in certain arenas and not in others. It's that we don't fit in that mold that people expect of a classical string quartet.

TS: So what is your favorite music, do your favorites shift and change over time?

JM: I am very devoted Beethoven string quartet fan. That is probably my favorite of all chamber music...and the Bartok, well, anything by Bartok. But of course I continually surprise myself when I hear anything by Haydn or Mozart, especially after having studied in Europe. Now they are like new pieces to me. You know what we missed and that we are finding now is the humor in Haydn and Mozart. People always talk about it in Haydn but I was never sure. I knew that Haydn was supposed to be humorous, but our professor would ask us what's this and what's this? Then he would say: "It's funny!" And we would say "Oh" and felt like we were these stuffy people. We didn't get it. When you put it in context with what was going on then...it was funny because no one ever did it that way. When you see it that way you start to realize that it is really hilarious. Now when I listen to Mozart or Haydn I just put myself into his time period and that's where the humor is.

Then ever since we played that show with Fred Frith I've been obsessed with anything to do with different sounds that are new to me. Recently I've been obsessed with Tuvan Throat Singing, probably for a couple of months now, reading everything I can find on Tuvan Throat Singing. It's amazing, just the sounds they can create with their voice. I've been watching a lot of Fred's videos and reading into all of the different techniques that guitar players use. They produce these sounds that I had no idea you could produce with a guitar. Classical guitar is its own thing, but then you listen to Eddy Van Halen or Fred Frith and hear these unique sounds... He's thinking outside the box. He's thinking: what are the sounds? Look at all these things I can do with a guitar... So I've been listening less to classical music and more to things that just have interesting sounds.

TS: But you guys are going to keep playing the Beethoven and the Bartók?

JM: It's always hard... I always wonder if Kronos came to point where they were playing the classics and then gradually shifted... We decided early on that we didn't want to get stuck in any one area. But we decided that classical quartet playing would be the hub. We take those skills and knowledge and apply it to everything else we do, whether its experimental, pop music or classical contemporary, or playing with Andrew W.K. That unit that we have developed coming out of classical training is the hub of a wheel... all the different spokes coming out

of it are the different things that we do. So everything comes out of that. So yeah, we always want to do that. Now the challenge is to figure out what percentage of our time and life is put into each thing. Because we also have teaching and what we call special events...

TS: What are some of those?

JM: Well, recently we have done some corporate speaking engagements. We were talking to someone who teaches at the USC School of Business and we realized that the way our quartet is set up is exactly how a successful business can be set up. We have an equal division of leadership. There isn't any one person who is good at everything, so by having an equal division of leadership we have shared the lead on our projects. Everyone has an equal say and there is an equal generation of ideas. The strengths of each person are added to create the whole piece, rather than one person trying to control everything. This is the way we play music and conduct our business. We have developed a way of demonstrating this through playing and talking; how this can apply to a business.

Businesses are looking for better ways to run their projects, better ways for everyone to work with each other. A lot of it is how your ego gets involved and how people relate to each other. The way that our quartet relates is a democratic relationship. We have to get to a point where we are comfortable being criticized and criticizing without it being personal. This is exactly how a corporation can work. We did a talk a couple of months ago at the USC School of Business.

Every once in a while we are involved with corporate events, just playing. Do you know what the Explorers Club is? We played their big gala at the Waldorf a year ago. And they actually commissioned a piece for us for their recent event at Cipriani in NY. The Waldorf event was amazing. We played the robot piece with Andrew W. K. and he wrote a piece for the event as well. The current president owns and lives in the Mendelssohn House in Berlin, so we met her in Berlin. Andrew stays at the Mendelssohn House whenever we go to Berlin. She periodically asks us to do events for the Explorers Club. Rolex sponsored the commission last year. Those are the special events.

There is a time and place for all of these things. We do a certain number of totally straight up classical concerts every year, and that's important. Then we do the experimentation. Our argument is why would you play a Beethoven Quartet in a modern art gallery? We probably would not do that. We would ask: what kind of art is it?

We really try to make a sonic connection with the space.
But that's just us...

Thomas Aujero Small

Copyright ©ConcertoNet.com