

Jasper String Quartet: A conversation with violist Sam Quintal

by Mike Telin



Since embarking on a professional career in 2006, the Jasper String Quartet has been guided by the philosophy of pursuing projects they are passionate about.

On Tuesday, July 18 at 8:00 pm in Kulas Recital Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory, [Credo Chamber Music](#) will present a faculty concert by the [Jasper](#)

[String Quartet](#), J Freivogel and Sae Chonabayashi, violins, Sam Quintal, viola, and Rachel Henderson Freivogel, cello. The program will include music by Haydn and Brahms and selections from Aaron Jay Kernis's *Quartet No. 3*, "River."

The Ensemble recently performed Kernis's Third Quartet at London's Wigmore Hall, one of the work's co-commissioners. "We love the piece," Sam Quintal said during a recent telephone conversation. "It's a thorny, interesting, moving, and beautiful work. We've been able to really get acquainted with it over the past two years, and we're now to the point where we are in control of the performance, and that's exciting."

Kernis's music has been an important part of the Jasper's repertoire for some time — they have recorded the composer's first two String Quartets and they plan to record the third. "From the moment we sat down to rehearse his second quartet — which we learned first — we just fell in love with his music. There's so much in there for us as performers, but there is also a lot of beauty for the listener. His Quartets feel like the

Beethoven Quartets — you can come back to them again and again, and each time find something new, both as a performer and as a listener.”

The Ensemble’s most recent album was released in March of this year. *Unbound* features works by Donnacha Dennehy, Annie Gosfield, Judd Greenspan, Ted Hearne, David Lang, Missy Mazzoli, and Caroline Shaw. “These composers write music that is of our time — you can hear elements of pop music but they are still using the string quartet form.”

The Jaspers are currently working on another commissioning project called “Four Seasons for String Quartet.” The violist explained that each of the four composers is from a place that is magical in the season they are writing about. The album will include works by Akria Nishimura (Japan — cherry blossoms in the spring), Christopher Theofanidis (New Haven — beautiful fall colors), Joan Tower (Hudson Valley — summer), and Lera Auerbach (Moscow — winter).

This past year the Quartet presented the inaugural season of Jasper Chamber Concerts in Philadelphia, where the group is the Professional Quartet in Residence at Temple University’s Center for Gifted Young Musicians.

Quintal said that after traveling around the country to perform on series that are organized by other people, the DIY approach to curating chamber music concerts has been an eye-opening experience. “There’s an excitement that goes with creating, and then performing on a series that we’ve organized. Like when we went out to play our first concert and there were twice as many people as we had expected — we hoped for 30 and almost 60 came. It was a unique experience — we’ve played hundreds of concerts but that was the first time we felt ownership of the whole event. It was very special.”

Creating the series also challenged them to seek out a suitable venue which they found in a Quaker Meeting House in the Chestnut Hill area of the city. “We were looking for places and I drove by it and thought ‘Oh, that looks interesting.’ It’s an amazing space. Everything is made of wood and it has a beautiful domed ceiling.”

Our conversation moved to the topic of mentoring young musicians who dream of being in a professional chamber music ensemble. I asked Quintal how he imparts advice that is encouraging, yet practical.

“The thing that has held true for our quartet is that if you really believe in what you’re doing, and you’re willing to work hard, you can do it,” he said. “It’s not going to be easy, but you can carve out a life for yourself doing what you want to in music. We

have gone through difficult times, but we're constantly evolving in what we're doing to make this a sustainable business. For example, as social media has become more important to get the word out we had to put an emphasis on that. It's great to be passionate about your activities, but you need to convince other people that they should be excited about them too."

Quintal also stressed that as young musicians begin to build a career based on their current passions, they will find new ones along the way. "A big part of what we do is outreach, like what we'll be doing at Credo — we'll talk about how we rehearse and do some coaching. We also do quite a bit of this for people who don't play an instrument, just to introduce them to classical music and to the quartet. That has become a huge facet of our career. I don't think we set out knowing that we would be good at it, or that it would be a big part of what we do — but it turns out that it is, and it's very rewarding."

This past year the Jaspers teamed with elementary school teacher Michael Leibowitz and his fourth-grade students at the John H. Taggart School in Philadelphia to create a piece based on *The Real story of the Three Little Pigs*.

"Rachel, J, and I knew Mike from Oberlin and when he realized that we were in Philadelphia he said we should do something together. So we put the project together with him, wrote a grant for it, and we got funding. We visited the school seven times and worked with the same class of kids. They were amazing. They read the book while we played musical interludes — which is something we had done as a quartet before, but this was our first time of working collaboratively. We learned a lot and I think the kids had a great time — they took a lot of ownership over it. We performed it together for the whole school."

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