

Poiesis Quartet return to Northeast Ohio for a Cleveland composing celebration

by Stephanie Manning



The long, rich history of string quartet music leaves today's ensembles with plenty of classic works to explore. The Poiesis Quartet knows such standard repertoire well — their performances of Béla Bartók's *String Quartet No. 5* helped earn them their win at the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, which skyrocketed the group's career in 2023.

But you're more likely to find the Cincinnati-based ensemble playing something new. So when Poiesis was offered the opportunity to perform seven different string quartets by members of the Cleveland Composers Guild, of course they said yes.

That concert on Sunday, March 16 — which will be held in Cleveland State University's Drinko Hall at 3:00 pm — features both premieres and other contemporary selections from the local composers.

"It's very exciting to us to collaborate with living composers," violinist Max Ball said in a recent interview. "So many of these pieces have really interesting backstories and things that can help an audience connect on a direct level."

Fellow violinist Sarah Ying Ma agreed. "For me, it's really important that we're putting forth performances that are more relatable for audiences — that a majority of people of any demographic or any background could relate and respond to."

Poiesis' visit to Northeast Ohio will be brief, so their in-person time with the composers is limited. "It's definitely quite a scramble to get everything together," Ball said. "It's just so much music, and we're really wanting to do justice to all of it."

But the two violinists, violist Jasper de Boor, and cellist Drew Dansby have been connecting with each composer over Zoom, where they've workshopped the music

together and learned the stories behind each piece. “We got to hear what their intentions are, and what we are meant to be representing for them,” Ma said (*pictured, right*). “It’s really fascinating how different our roles are for each of these pieces.”

Geoffrey Peterson’s *Seasons Journey*, for example, honors the composer’s aunt, who died of cancer in 2002. And Jeremy Piper’s *Majestic Foothills of Mt. Yasparia* describes a place straight from Piper’s imagination — a mythical world called Yasparia, which he has written music about for years.



Working with those types of musical stories “is really cool for us to be able to latch on to, and envision something that is more correlated with what the composer wanted,” Ma said. “It opens up a lot of different pathways for us.”

In a bit of a full-circle moment, *Seasons Journey* was originally premiered by the Cavani Quartet, many of whose members Poiesis count as mentors. Annie Fullard, one of the Cavani’s violinists, was the one to recommend Poiesis to the Composers Guild. “It’s really cool to play a piece that the Cavani premiered,” Ma said, “and then meet the composer through this opportunity now.”

Lorenzo Salvagni’s *Scherzo*, by contrast, was written for Poiesis themselves. This is the composer’s first piece for a string quartet, and Sunday will mark its world premiere. “It’s filled with a lot of joy and some really beautiful, self-reflective moments,” Ball said (*pictured, left*). “It’s a super well-constructed piece and fits really well on the instruments.”



The program is rounded out by Margi Griebing-Haigh’s *Vistas Desde el Balcón*, Ryan Charles Ramer’s *Animal Dreams*, Sebastian Birch’s *Ephemeral Timelines*, and Cara Hao’s *Says the Almanac*. “Each piece is so different and really interesting,” Ball said.

Poiesis’ star only continues to rise — in May 2024, they won the Concert Artists Guild Competition, earning a spot on CAG’s North American management roster. They’re currently the graduate quartet-in-residence at the University

of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, as well as the ensemble-in-residence of a Cincinnati-based collective called concertnova. It's a lot to juggle, and "it's really hard," Ma said frankly.

"Each like semester that passes feels way busier than the last," Ball added. "It's a process of figuring out what checks and balances need to be fulfilled for each of us to be successful in all areas of life."

Thinking ahead to a future where things will only get more hectic, Ma said she reminds herself to "do whatever it takes to not burn out, keep myself rested and healthy, and take as many breaks as I can.

"If we're able to do that now, then we'll build the skills to also do that later."

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