MUSICAL EVENTS

ALMOST FAMOUS

On the road with the St. Lawrence Quartet.

BY ALEX ROSS

Eleven years ago, the Emerson String Quartet was auditioning younger ensembles for a training program at the Hartt School of Music, in Connecticut. Piles of performance tapes came in, and the Emersons decided to listen to them while driving between destinations on a European tour. One tape, from a young Toronto quartet, juxtaposed the expected Beethoven with a contemporary Canadian work in which the players were required to yell at the top of their lungs. The screaming began just as the Emersons were negotiating a difficult stretch of Alpine road. "We'd heard this perfectly good Beethoven, and we were saying, 'Very nice,' when the screaming started, and we almost lost control of the car," the violinist Philip Setzer recalled. "We could all have died right then and there. Of course, we had to meet the crazy kids who sent in the tape."

A decade later, the members of the St. Lawrence String Quartet—Geoff Nuttall, Barry Shiffman, Lesley Robertson, and Marina Hoover—have a firm foothold in the world of American chamber music. They are the ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University, and they regularly train younger quartets themselves. Yet they have not lost their contrarian streak, and they have a way of catching audiences off guard. There is a restless freedom to their playing, as if the dinner-party conversation of chamber music were about to break down into altercation, demonstration, or confession. "They've got something," David Finckel, the cellist of the Emerson, says. "Performers either have something or they don't, and the St. Lawrence does. I'm not sure what it is. Partly, it's the

The St. Lawrence Quartet's Geoff Nuttall, Barry Shiffman, Marina Hoover, and Lesley Rober

MAGNUM

ability to play the most familiar music as if it were new and unusual. Everything the quartet does becomes contemporary music. Listening, I forget that I do the same thing for a living."

There are at least a hundred full-time professional string quartets in North America, plus an untold number of amateurs. To make a living in this field, you have to be willing to play almost anywhere and at any time. Even a group as famous as the Emerson follows the same exhausting routine: fly into a strange town, rent a car, test out the hall, play the concert, go to the post-concert reception, get a few hours' sleep, return to the airport, and fly to the next date. The St. Lawrence has made successful débuts in London and Amsterdam, and it has also won the acclaim of Canadian fishing villages, Uruguayan mountain towns, and Kansas City public schools. Perhaps its most unusual appearance was in Vietnam, at the Hanoi Opera House, a replica of the Palais Garnier, in Paris. The wealthier patrons were seated in the auditorium, but a crowd of thousands watched a telecast of the concert outside, many of them leaning on their scooters.

The one place where the Lawrences have been little seen is New York. One of my earliest assignments as a local critic was to cover their New York début, in 1992; they appeared in the Young Concert Artists series, at the 92nd Street Y, and I was struck by the intelligent passion of their playing. Although they made rapid advances in the business—they signed with Columbia Artists Management, Inc., or CAMI, a powerhouse agency, and got a recording contract with EMI—they never returned in a flashy way. The star system in New York, it turns out, is a finicky one, lavishing immense resources on a tiny élite. Whole weeks of the season are taken up with Yo-Yo Ma projects, Maurizio Pollini perspectives, and James Levine marathons. Every concert becomes an "event," festooned with thematic concepts, panel discussions, booklets, and theatrics. To hear a concert where the event is nothing more than the sheer give-and-take of music-making, you almost have to leave town.

esley *Robertson: Bringing chamber music to anyone who will listen. Photograph by Gilles Peress.*

MAGNUM

Last month, the St. Lawrence Quartet played two concerts in El Paso, Texas, and one in Joplin, Missouri. There were the usual hassles on the road. A sandstorm delayed the flights out of Dallas-Fort Worth, and when the members of the quartet got to the hotel, at midnight, the reception desk had no record of their reservations. It was one of those sleepy, lost-in-time places—call it the Vista Grande—where guests are a confusing novelty. When I arrived, I was handed a cryptic message that said, "Barry: Call Alex." Still, the vista was grand. You could look out over basketball courts, medical facilities, and pueblo-style suburbs to the brown expanse of the Rio Grande, with Juárez looming on the other side.

The next day, at around noon, the Lawrences gathered in the lobby. If you had been told that they were musicians, but not of the classical kind, you might have guessed that they were a veteran indie-pop band, some well-travelled cousin to Yo La Tengo. Nuttall, the athletic first violinist, found a Y.M.C.A. and had been lifting weights. Shiffman, the second violinist, and Robertson, the violist, had been practicing. Hoover, the cellist, was with her husband, Richard Bernstein, and their seven-month-old baby, Benjamin. Hoover often looks harried: travelling with a baby is hard enough, but a baby and a cello together can spell real trouble. Flight attendants have tried to bar her cello from planes, even though she always buys a seat for it. The attendants apparently have a vision of the instrument flying around the cabin and causing a crash. Hoover is the most organized of the Lawrences—she is the one who knows when the next plane leaves—and she has a way of barrelling past human annoyances as if they simply were not there.

Kwang-Wu Kim, the artistic director of El Paso Pro-Musica, was waiting for the quartet in the lobby. He is, in classical-music parlance, the "presenter." The Lawrences have had all kinds of experiences with presenters: some good, some bad, some indifferent. They have worked with a music-loving radiologist who goes over programming minutiae while on break from the hospital; a philosophy professor who has a seventy-person concert hall in his home; and an eclectic Florida promoter who puts on chamber music one night and Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme the next. Presenters who are more accustomed to unruly popular acts are pleased by their demeanor. One impresario found them refreshing after a recent run-in with a

"More aphorisms, please!"

• • •

well-known folk-music personality, who had abruptly disappeared from her hotel after noticing that an instance of "improper land management" was visible from her window.

The Lawrences think highly of Kwang-Wu Kim. "He's a genius," they said to me beforehand. A pianist, professor, and all-around explainer, Kim has degrees in philosophy from Yale and in music from Peabody. He has attracted a Who's Who of American chamber players to El Paso during the past eight years. He has also ventured into the El Paso schools, retrieving out-of-tune pianos from janitorial closets and introducing kids to the classics. In July, he will become the president of the Longy School of Music, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and El Paso was already mourning his departure.

Kim and the Lawrences traded complaints about the unhelpfulness of CAMI. "The people there sent me the wrong programs, and then they told me that they didn't understand the need for sending copies of the program notes in advance," Kim said. The Lawrences collectively rolled their eyes: management's aloofness from their daily lives is a long-running problem. The subject of audience turnout came up. "We're not sure if this is going to be our biggest audience of the year," Kim said. "Somehow, we forgot that this weekend is Passover. Also, Matchbox Twenty is playing tonight at the University of Texas, which means that the students probably won't show up. And we couldn't get an article into the local paper. They told us that they were concerned about already giving too much attention to classical music, which is pretty funny, because they don't pay any attention to classical music at all."

For the two concerts, more than three hundred people appeared, most of them well-to-do and middle-aged. At one point, Kim gave a farewell talk, and the full extent of his genius was revealed. He was a blast of positive energy, flattering the audience with a sense that this series was no less important than the East Coast world from which he came. "I was the laughingstock of the Peabody Conservatory when I announced that I was going to El Paso," he said. "They were horrified. Their basic attitude was 'Another one bites the dust.' Well, we need to stop making value judgments about place. There is absolutely no difference in real musical value between a concert in Carnegie Hall and a concert at the Fox Fine Arts Center in El Paso. Music is a universal act of human conversation, and an identical act of conver-

sation is happening in each place. Haydn didn't write his quartets for New York City, and they are equally at home in El Paso."

In New York, it is considered a bit undignified for performers to address the audience, but the members of the St. Lawrence have found it natural to talk about what they're up to. They have a gift for describing musical abstractions in down-to-earth terms. Nuttall warned the El Paso crowd that a contemporary piece—Jonathan Berger's "Miracles and Mud"—would appear on the first half of the program. "We like to put the modern work second, just before intermission," he said. "That way, you can't come late and miss it, and you can't leave at intermission and skip it." There was knowing laughter from the crowd. He explained the idea behind Berger's work, which has to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and played the two recurring folk themes that represent the warring peoples. This demonstration seemed to make Berger's tangy, Bartókian dissonances more palatable. Three-fourths of the quartet is generally enthusiastic about contemporary works; Robertson tends to be initially skeptical. "The viola part is often more interesting in the modern pieces," she told me, "but sometimes I'm happier droning on one note in a Haydn quartet, because I know exactly where that note belongs, logically and emotionally."

Nuttall then talked about Haydn's "Quinten" Quartet, which opened the concert. "I have most of the hard licks," he said. "I'd happily play Haydn all the time, but the others get bored with repeating the same simple figures." He did a run of notes in his sweet-toned, Heifetz-like style. When he plays, he has a habit of kicking one leg back and half getting out of his chair. His hair tends to change length and color; in El Paso, it was cropped short, with blond highlights. "He looks like some dude from the beach," a man at the back of the room whispered. Nuttall's looks are a plus when he is addressing youngsters in educational programs, but the Pro-Musica regulars were a little suspicious. Still, his way of vibrantly zeroing in on details seemed to win them over. "In the final movement," he went on, "Haydn does this thing to the solo line which is actually pretty cool. He puts in this weird fingering so you end up having to slide from one note to another, and suddenly you're playing in Gypsy style—portamento. It's as if Haydn were telling conservatory-trained violinists to forget their training and loosen up."

Nuttall is the St. Lawrence's "secret weapon," as the rest of the group admits. An opera maven and pop-music fan, he plays his solo lines with an airy, vocal freedom, exhibiting a distinct personality that is lacking in many better-known soloists. "He has a way of generating intensity in all of us, with his revved-up excitement at whatever he's playing," Hoover told me. His phrasing often upsets the central pulse of a movement, and the others either follow his lead or scramble to restore rhythmic order. As a result, despite the rigorous discipline of the quartet's rehearsal process, many passages sound riotously improvised. "They play with unself-conscious joy," says the composer Osvaldo Golijov, whose work "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" was performed by the St. Lawrence last week in Santa Fe. "They can excite people who show up at chamber-music concerts by a fluke. I saw this happen with a group of Argentine soccer players."

The St. Lawrence's art of cultured chaos had a bracing effect on Tchaikovsky's Third Quartet, which was the centerpiece of the El Paso concerts. Tchaikovsky and Schumann are two composers whom the Lawrences have investigated thoroughly; they recorded two Schumann quartets two years ago for EMI, and in the fall they will release a disk of Tchaikovsky. Both composers have been accused of writing unidiomatic chamber music, but the Tchaikovsky roared to life on this occasion. In rehearsal, the players concentrated on clarifying its complicated, three-against-two rhythm. In performance, they threw everything back up in the air, flirting with disaster in the opening movement. In the funeral-march Andante, Nuttall's solos sobbed in the middle distance, sounding like 78-r.p.m. records of turn-of-the-century divas; Shiffman's obsessive, one-note patterns gnawed at the fabric of the harmony. The finale played like a scandalous, drunken wake.

Cocktail-party chatter is the last thing you might want to engage in

after such a performance, but the post-concert reception is a fact of life on the chamber circuit, and the Lawrences go at it gamely. The El Paso crowd turned out to be more interesting than most. The players were buttonholed in the lobby by the Reverend Paul Green, who congratulated them on raising the cultural temper of the town, and by J. O. Stewart, Jr., who underwrote the concert. Stewart was an impressive man with a hawklike face and a handsome pair of cowboy boots who recently sold his company, El Paso Disposal, for a hundred and forty million dollars. "I worked in the trash business for thirty years," he said, "so I may be a trashy guy, but that was a fine concert, and I liked the new thing, too. Maybe I can get used to that stuff. Like I always say, you can only play with one tennis racquet at a time."

There was a late-night dinner at the home of Charles and Ellen Lacy, in the hills above El Paso. Nuttall, who lived in Texas when he was a child, stayed the longest, drinking wine with a group of reformed good old boys. "I like those guys," he said, as we drove back to the Vista Grande. "They know how to kick back. They're not stuffy, even though they have some weird-ass politics. But I wish there had been a few more young people. Where were the University of Texas students? At Matchbox Twenty, I guess. Kind of kills me that there's ten thousand people seeing them and a hundred people seeing us. I don't see why the difference should be that dramatic. I mean, Rob Thomas is a good singer and all, but we're—we've got the deeper songs."

After the second concert, which took place the following afternoon, the Lawrences left for Joplin. In travel mode, they go their separate ways, not worrying if the others are on schedule. In the vastness of the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, I noticed that Nuttall had wandered off. "Where's Geoff?" I asked. "We never ask that question," the others replied. It was well after midnight when we reached Joplin. It's a midsize town in the southwestern corner of the state, not far from the country-and-Western playground of Branson. Shiffman caught sight of a poster for Shoji Tabuchi, a Liberace-style fiddler who plays in Branson. The poster read, "Shoji: Need We Say More?" "This is great!" the violinist said, jumping up and down in a fit of ironic excitement. "We should have this kind of marketing. 'The St. Lawrence String Quartet: Need We Say More?' "

Joplin offered a recapitulation of themes already developed in El Paso. This series was also called Pro Musica, and it, too, had a decisive personality at the center. Cynthia Schwab, an exacting Manhattan native, has been working to create a musical oasis in Joplin for twenty years. "The three things in life that mean the most to me are God, hockey, and music," she said. In her garage, a New York Rangers banner hung next to a poster for the Leipzig Chamber Orchestra. Last fall, Schwab approached the St. Lawrence with a surprising proposal: for the twentieth anniversary of her series, she wanted the group to play an all-contemporary program.

The Joplin concert took place in a handsome old church at the center of town. The star attraction was the Third Quartet of R. Murray Schafer, a Canadian composer who writes peculiarly captivating avant-garde pieces. The Schafer quartet has long been one of the St. Lawrence's favorites. It begins with the cellist playing alone, somewhat despondently. One by one, the others enter—from behind the stage and from the back of the hall. War erupts between the violins, with savage accusations traded back and forth. In the second movement, all hell breaks loose: the Lawrences reprise their notorious yelling act, screaming gibberish in tandem with fast-moving dissonant lines. It's a spellbinding spectacle, and it is also a hilarious send-up of the emotional infantilism of the ultramodern repertory. Then, in the final movement, the mood turns solemn, as the quartet plays a prayerful unison melody in ghostly quarter tones.

At the end, the music disappears over the horizon of audibility, leaving a mystical silence.

The citizens of Joplin had a mixed reaction to this astonishing piece. A third of them didn't buy it, and they expressed their dismay by leaving at intermission, trudging in stony silence to the church parking lot. There were enthusiastic yelps, however, from a group of younger people in the back rows. They turned out to be music students, some of whom had worked with the St. Lawrence in its quartet-training program at Stanford, and they had driven three hours from Kansas City to see their mentors play. Four of them belonged to a quartet called the Yurodivy, which is Russian for "holy fool." The leader of the Yurodivys was Francisco Herrera, a large fellow in a purple sash. "Did you hear the intonation in the third movement?" he asked. "Incredible. There's no kitsch in their playing. They absolutely believe in what they're doing."

At the inevitable post-concert dinner, Cynthia Schwab made it clear that the Yurodivy crew could not be accommodated. The mood turned glum. Nuttall, in particular, looked crestfallen. He poked at his dessert unenthusiastically. "I'm sorry your young friends weren't able to come," Schwab eventually said, after conversation glided to a halt. "I had to get you over here, and I have responsibilities to my board members." Nuttall shook his head and replied, "You should be bringing more young people like them to your concerts. They are the audience of the future."

It was now close to midnight, and the Lawrences had to catch a 7 A.M. flight the next morning. They piled into their rented Dodge Caravan and drove off. From this tour, each of them had earned, after expenses, a low four-figure sum that wouldn't have covered the hotel bill for Pollini's piano. As I headed to my motel room, I thought of the Yurodivys, driving back to Kansas City in the dark, and of Cynthia Schwab's reception, and of the many ways in which classical music entangles itself in a web of money and status. And I realized that the four musicians of the St. Lawrence are remarkable not simply for the quality of their music-making, exalted as it is, but for the joy they take in the act of connection. ♦