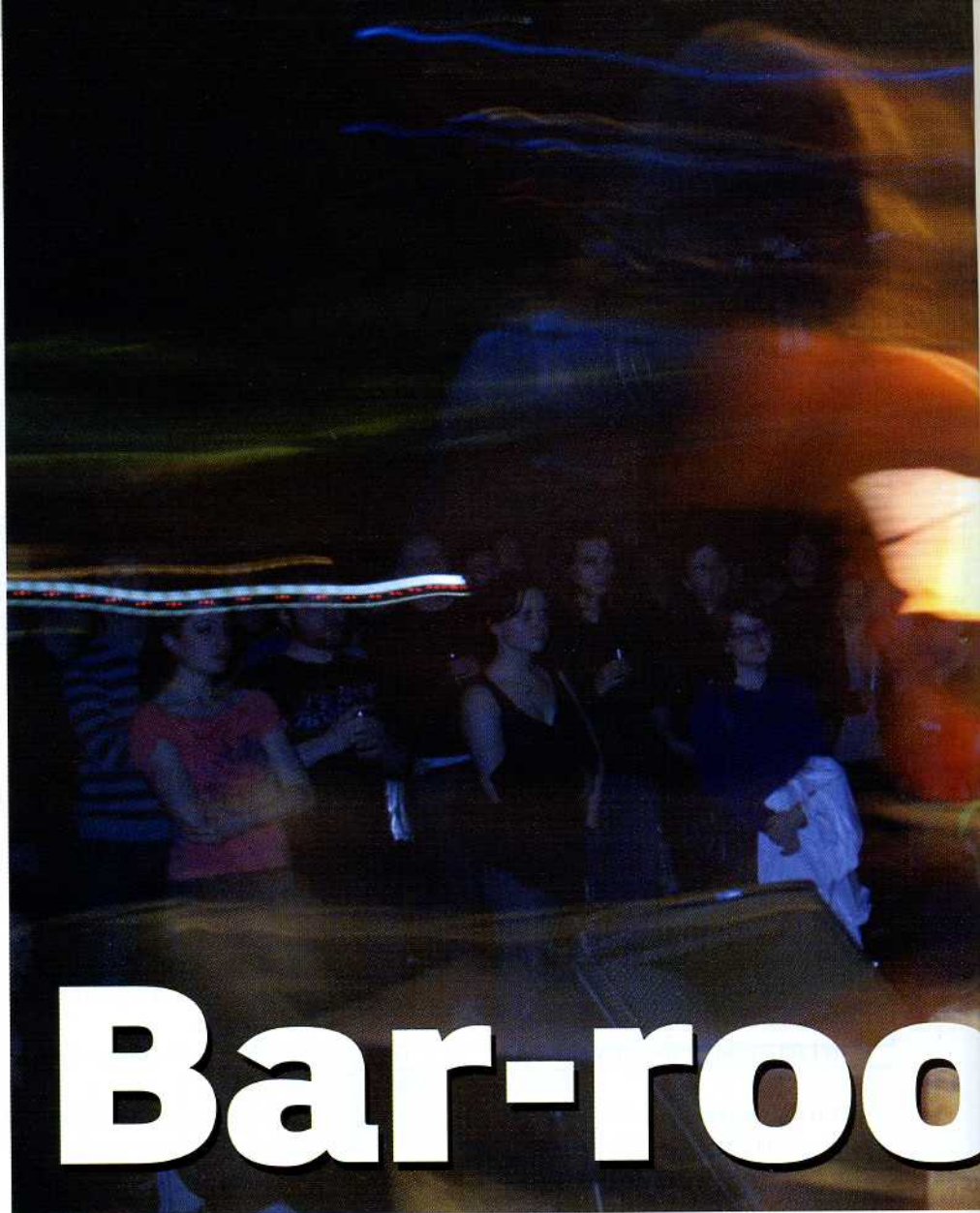


Performing in pubs, bars and clubs can help young string players find new audiences. Katherine Millett talks to the quartets who have braved unusual venues with success



To beat a hurricane, the Parker Quartet drove through flooded streets toward a bar in downtown Richmond, Virginia. On such a stormy night it might have been tempting to cancel the gig, but the group wanted to play every concert on its six-city tour of American nightclubs.

'It was so chaotic outside, the place felt like a haven,' says violinist Karen Kim, a member of the student quartet. 'Only 15 or 20 people showed up, but the evening was magical.' While the audience sipped wine or beer, the quartet played Schumann, Mozart and Ligeti. Between movements, singer-songwriter Wynn Walent offered original songs, sometimes to the quartet's improvised accompaniment.

'It turned out to be a very intimate concert,' says Patrick Hammond of Concert Artists Guild, the non-profit arts agency that booked the tour as part of its

NewMusic/NewPlaces initiative. 'At a bar you're not some automaton who's been in a practice room your whole life. When someone's sitting five feet away with a beer in their hand, you have to be a performer.'

Increasingly, young chamber groups in the United States are playing in bars, restaurants, parks and shopping malls. In the UK, where outreach programmes regularly include such venues as schools, community centres and old people's homes, a number of young ensembles and classical music promoters are also venturing into pubs and nightclubs. By striking out beyond the music school and traditional concert spaces, a group can reach new audiences and gain public performing experience.

So how do you get booked?

Start close to home, says John Marcus, a violinist with the Enso Quartet. 'We live in New York, and one of us knows a guy who owns a jazz club on the Lower East Side. We asked if we could play there, and

he was willing to give us a try. We were pleasantly surprised to find the place packed, with 80 or 90 people. They were attentive, too. I found that I got wrapped up in the music more quickly than I usually do in a more nerve-racking, formal atmosphere. We made about \$300 that night, which isn't bad.'

His advice: 'Don't be afraid to call up and ask to play at your local watering hole!'

Like many opportunities in the world of freelancing, it's often not what you know but who you know. When the Elysian Quartet, all graduates of Trinity College of Music, were invited to support the band Hot Chip at the Horseshoe Tavern in Clerkenwell, London, the gig came through friendship and mutual respect. Two players in the quartet, whose musical interests range beyond classical into pop, jazz and hip-hop, had once been members of the band. 'I remember being a little bit worried about how our set was going to go down,' says violinist Emma Smith.



A chamber music night at London's Cargo club, featuring the Elysian Quartet

'But people were amazed at seeing a string quartet – they'd probably never seen one up close before.'

Playing to a bar-room often calls for inventive programming. The Elysian Quartet turned its 45 minutes into a DJ set, playing improvised links to fill the silence between short pieces by Purcell, David Matthews, James MacMillan and others. Smith recalls: 'We wanted to eliminate the embarrassment some people feel at traditional concerts when they don't know when to clap. We thought if we don't give them the opportunity to clap, then they don't have to worry about it.'

Concerns about noise – people getting drinks, talking and fidgeting – shouldn't put young players off such venues. In the Elysian Quartet's experience, even audiences accustomed to heavy metal bands will sit up and listen when a string quartet begins to play. 'Whenever we've played,' says Smith, 'we've always found that people are just so attentive and quiet.'

But what if the audience isn't all ears? Play anyway, for the experience, says David Harrington, founder of the eminent Kronos Quartet. 'I think every quartet should get a job in a noisy restaurant,' he says. 'You can play whatever you want, fall on your butt, and nobody will notice. You get the experience of starting on the first note and ending on the last somehow.'

While playing in coffee houses and bars isn't for everyone, the Parker Quartet certainly wowed the crowd at the Lizard Lounge in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Billy Beard, the jazz musician who ordinarily books jazz and rock bands at the bar, was stunned by the quartet's success.

'The reaction was un-bee-leev-able,' he says. 'The crowd absolutely loved it. The comments I got the next day were amazing. The sound engineer said he would never have believed that 60 to 70 people could sit there, rapt, and listen like that. I've already booked them again.' >

m tales

KEITH WOTTS/AM

The Enso Quartet passes round the 'hat' at the Barbès Club in Brooklyn



PATRICK HAWKING

I got wrapped up in the music more quickly than I do in a more nerve-racking and formal atmosphere

The Elysian Quartet plays for an attentive crowd at Cargo



“Whenever we’ve played, we’ve always found that people are just so attentive and quiet

After wrangling with such questions during a whole week of discussions, the Chiara Quartet came up with a mission statement. Violist Jonah Sirota urges other musicians to go through the same exercise.

‘Playing Beethoven well can’t be the basis for a career any more,’ he says. ‘There are more well-trained quartets and genres of music than ever before, but I’m sick of hearing that there’s a limited audience for chamber music. I think the audience is limitless – if you’re prepared to go find that audience.’ ■

Playing it safe - and legal

UK

The Licensing Act of 2003 requires musicians to apply for permits before playing in public, unless they play in licensed premises, such as a licensed pub or restaurant, or under the auspices of their schools. Two or more musicians planning to busk should file a Temporary Event Notice ten days in advance with their local licensing authority. For further information, see ‘The Simple Guide to Licensing for Circuses and Street Arts,’ prepared for Arts Council England, at www.artscouncil.org.uk

US

Public performance laws vary among municipalities. Check local ordinances to determine whether a permit is required of ‘buskers’, or ‘street performers’. Several cities, including, among others, Boston, Chicago, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Santa Monica and Toledo, require musicians to obtain permits before playing in restricted areas. See the independent website <http://communityartsadvocates.org/saa/regulations.html> for more information.

another with a local college. The college eventually offered them a van and medical benefits. Next came \$200 an hour for concert performances and a small salary. It took seven years for the quartet to attain enough stature to be hired full-time as faculty members at the University of Victoria in British Columbia.

To make money in bars and coffee houses Hammond advises musicians to pass the hat, as he did after each of the Parker’s performances on its six-city tour last autumn. ‘We told the audience we were driving a van and needed gas money,’ he says. ‘They were very responsive. I think it’s usually better to pass the hat than to ask for a percentage of the cover charge. If people pay a \$5 cover, they figure they’re through. But if you pass the hat, a few people drop in tens and twenties.’

Even more important, says Hammond, is to pass the email list. ‘Pass the list around,

even if it makes you uncomfortable to do it,’ he says. ‘An email list is your best marketing tool, by far. Next time you play in that city, send messages to all those people asking them to come and bring their friends. That’s how you build an audience for your music.’

Despite the difficulties of making a substantial income, the peripatetic life of a contemporary musician offers a wealth of benefits, says John Barber, a producer at the Open Academy at London’s Royal Academy of Music. ‘Most of our students are going to have portfolio careers. Some will have jobs with orchestras, but most will do outreach and freelance work,’ he says. ‘They will discover an enormous amount about themselves. When you perform for people who don’t have your training, you have to ask yourself why you love this music and why you want to communicate it.’