

the finish



line



MIRÓ QUARTET: Daniel Ching, left,
John Largess, Joshua Grindele, and
Sandy Yamamoto.

In the competitive world of chamber music, professional players run a marathon to win faculty positions. But that course can be fraught with obstacles

the biggest, most successful, most advanced training program for string quartets in the world is in America," says Barry Shiffman, formerly a violinist with the St. Lawrence Quartet, now director of music programs at the Banff Centre in Canada. "That has a lot to do with the wide range of artists-in-residence positions, from the top of the heap—the tenured faculty positions—to more modest visiting residencies. These are the lifeblood of the ensemble that make it possible to make a living."

BY KATHERINE MILLETT

CHAMBER RESIDENCIES

Unlike the past, when chamber musicians toured extensively to eek out a living, a string quartet no longer needs to play 120 concerts a year. Somewhere between 30 and 80 will do, if the players have faculty jobs at a college or university. Or the quartet may combine several smaller residencies and teach at a summer music festival.

The possibilities are growing as new residencies appear every year—mostly west of the Mississippi.

Young ensembles are proposing them to universities that have never before tried them, and universities are learning that a resident chamber ensemble—especially a string quartet—enhances the institution's prestige and draws gifted students.

"They carry the flag for the university all over the world," says music-department chair Karl Kramer, speaking of the Pacifica Quartet, in residence since 2005 at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, one of three residencies the quartet holds. "They're better than star athletes. They're all over the place recruiting, fund-raising, playing concerts, not just holed up in their room playing chamber music.

"They're so busy I encourage them to have some private time."



Matching the desires of a quartet to the needs of a university requires good faith on both sides. The job must offer the right mixture of teaching, performing, and compensation.

In the end, only a handful of quartets will land faculty positions while others will decide to split because, ultimately, the dream wasn't worth the sacrifice—few will be as fortunate as the Miró Quartet, which in 2005 became

BETTER THAN STAR ATHLETES: The Pacifica Quartet.

the first chamber-music ensemble to win a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant of \$15,000.

For those that succeed, there is an array of different arrangements: long-term, short-term, combined with orchestra jobs, working with graduate quartets or even with students who get no academic credit for studying chamber music.

Enterprising quartets will find that the possibilities have expanded enormously since the first American residency.

In 1940, the University of Wisconsin at Madison hired the Pro Arte String Quartet, which appears to have been the first such residency at a US college. At the time, the Belgian group, which still exists with different personnel, had been stranded stateside by the outbreak of World War II, and the university offered a safe harbor.

Today, some groups support themselves on a bundle of short-term residencies, while

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others focus on a single appointment. A quick overview, by no means comprehensive, begins at the top with tenured faculty positions like the ones held by the Ying Quartet at the Eastman School of Music, the Ciampi Quartet at Duke University, and, starting on tenure track this fall, the Avalon Quartet at Northern Illinois University, succeeding the Vermeer Quartet's 36-year affiliation.

Tenure, which guarantees a faculty job until the professor leaves or retires, is extremely rare for music ensembles, possibly because it has not been a tradition at most music conservatories. No member of the Juilliard String Quartet has tenure, but the group has been playing for 60 years and arguably made that fabled music school's name a household word—not the other way around.

Tenure can be tricky, because what if one member of the quartet leaves?

At the Manhattan School of Music, the American String Quartet has been in residence since 1984 with no hint of formal tenure. While Yale University has dozens of tenured professors, its music school follows the conservatory model.

"We don't have tenure in the [Yale] School of Music," says Dean Robert Blocker, "but members of the Tokyo String Quartet have been on our faculty for 30 years."

Tenure can be tricky, because what if one member of the quartet leaves? Members of the Oxford String Quartet, in residence at Miami University in Ohio, were left gasping after their first violinist left in 2005. A series of players had kept the quartet going for 60 years, but the school decided not to hire a new violinist. With an eerie lack of explanation, the university website displays a picture of the three remaining players and the words:



TOKYOS WITHOUT TENURE: Martin Beaver, left, Kikuei Ikeda, Clive Greensmith, and Kazuhide Isomura.

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"Four outstanding individuals join together in a fresh, exciting ensemble . . ."

"We're hoping to search for a new violinist at the end of this year," says the Oxford violist Mary Harris. "The chair of the music department has fought to get the violin position back and I'm optimistic."



THE YINGS: Hold an Eastman residency.

Of course, faculty positions aren't for everyone. The Kronos Quartet thrives independently, for instance, and violinist David Harrington, the group's ever-young founder, says even thinking about residencies "gives me cold hands." Early on, though, the quartet had a champion in the administration at Mills College in Oakland, California. Margaret Lyon gave the quartet a long leash there and made one of the great matches in contemporary chamber music by introducing Kronos to composer Terry Riley. When Lyon left the college, things changed.

"It was a legit job, and we had a lot of freedom at first," says Jean Jeanrenaud, who served as the quartet's cellist for 20 years until 1999, "but then we learned Mills was going to dump us."

Kronos celebrated its departure with a farewell concert.

Harrington still gloats over the memory of the quartet, dressed in lab coats, playing "Sex Machine" while a little machine called Elvis the Singing Robot toddled back and forth on the stage.

"My favorite moment," says Harrington, "was hearing the new director's high heels click while she left the hall."

Not all quartets are rock stars like Kronos, which makes a good living without a residency, but most successful residencies begin with a champion and a little chutzpah. How about making a cold call to the University of Chicago in an attempt to land a residency? Pacifica cellist Brandon Vamos did that several years ago, long before the quartet even considered its current full-time residency at the University of Illinois. He could not have picked a more unlikely mark. The Nobel-counting University of Chicago had never hired a resident ensemble, and it prizes a severe brand of intellectual rigor that gives no academic credit for applied music.

The Pacifica was just out of grad school at the time, still unknown, holding on to a new career by its collective fingernails.

"You just don't know if you're going to make it," says Vamos, "and you don't know how long you can put up with the financial instability. You look around and see your friends getting orchestra jobs and buying cars. It takes time for a string quartet to reach a point of stability.

"You have to go through a lot."

Part of surviving the uncertainty was waiting for an answer to that bold phone call. It

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took two years before Barbara Schubert, the conductor of the university's orchestra, responded.

She now modestly declines to give many details, but somehow she persuaded layers of the university's administration to hire the Pacifica as its resident quartet.

Schubert calls the residency, now in its fourth year, a "conspicuous success" and an eye-opener for the quartet.

"At first they didn't understand our students' motivation—we have smart students who play chamber music for the love of it—but they turned out to be just the right group."

The Pacifica took on yet another part-time job this year, a four-year visiting residency at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

These small residencies supplement its full-time job at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, where quartet members earned \$70,000 each in 2006 to play concerts, teach private lessons, coach chamber ensembles, collaborate with professors, and work with student composers.

According to Kramer, the decision to hire the Pacifica came down to the players' excellence as teachers as well as performers.

One of the most significant variables in residencies is the amount of teaching time required. "A big division exists between the ones that require individual players to teach private students and those that leave the quartet to its own devices," says violist Phillip Ying of the Ying Quartet, who, in addition to his professorship at Eastman, serves as president of Chamber Music America.

The Chiara String Quartet, which landed a first-ever residency at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2006, focuses mainly on concerts. "They are great teachers, which we knew when they coached in our summer program," says music-department chair John Richmond. "They're wonderful human capital for us. We want them out there giving concerts, because every time they appear, it's as resident artists of the University of Nebraska."

But don't dare call the Chiara "Midwestern."

"We're still New Yorkers," says Chiara violist Jonah Sirota.

True, the Chiara had a Rainer Arnhold Fellowship at Juilliard before moving to Nebraska, but it had also spent three years in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in a rural resi-

dency funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. (Rural residencies terminated in 2003, but Chamber Music America continues to fund more modest proposals.)

Identification with the East Coast and the Big City dies hard for some musicians. But, although he claims New York as his true home, Chiara cellist Greg Beaver says moving to Lincoln was the best thing the quartet could have done. "We've gotten so many concerts because of the residency," Beaver says. "Presenters book at least two years in advance, and if you have a job like this, they know you'll be around in two years."

Another group that ventured from a major city is the Fry Street Quartet, which formed in Chicago. The group moved to Logan, Utah, five years ago to become the first quartet-in-residence at Utah State University. The move followed the Fry Street's three-year rural residency in Hickory, North Carolina.

"To be frank," says Fry Street cellist Anne Francis, "we didn't think we'd be here in five years, and the school didn't think so either. They expected a new quartet would rotate through every two or three years. It's a lot of work, because we *are* the string department at Utah State, but it has also been extremely rewarding. Kids in this state stick close to

The case of the Everest String Quartet illustrates what can go wrong, even for a quartet that seems to have everything.

home, and a lot of them study music. This is where they want to come to college, to take private lessons, and also work with a string quartet."

To stay in New York City, where competition is keen and university jobs relatively few, the Manhattan String Quartet cultivates short-term residencies like its twice-a-year visits to Colgate University in upstate New York. As part of a humanities survey for freshmen, the group relates the music it performs to developments in other disciplines.

"We present our classes onstage," says Manhattan violist John Dexter, "with the students sitting five feet away, and fire quartets at them from extremely close range. Many, many students have never before heard a live quartet, much less gone to a quartet concert."

Great teachers and prestigious prizes can launch a quartet toward its first residency, but the circumstances of that residency must satisfy all four players, as well as the university. More often than not, quartets do not survive.

The case of the Everest String Quartet illustrates what can go wrong, even for a quartet that seems to have everything—excellent teachers, prestigious prizes, and a promising first residency.

After winning its residency by audition in 1994, the group moved to a small city in Texas to serve as the quartet-in-residence for an orchestra that also paid each player to lead a string section.

"We thought we'd won the battle by finding the right combination of people," says the cellist, Brant Taylor. "We made enough to live on at about \$25,000 a year, because the cost of living was very low, and we were being paid to rehearse chamber music, which is exactly what we wanted to do."

At first, the joys far outweighed the sacrifices for Taylor, violinists Stephen Rose and Jeanne Preucil Rose, and violist Joan Der-Hovsepian.

"We went from being in school, with everybody telling us how things should go, to being in the middle of nowhere and figuring out music for ourselves," Taylor recalls. "We learned so much."

But there was a problem.

"We were the only culture in town," he adds. "We'd finish a week of rehearsing, and then we'd all be calling each other to go out

to dinner. We were, basically, the only people we wanted to spend time with."

The group needed a full-time residency with a college or university. Without the comfortable income that comes with faculty jobs, not to mention health insurance, retirement benefits, and an intellectual community, the idyll of quartet life could not last.

"We set a deadline," says Taylor, "of three years. If we didn't get a residency, we'd split up."

Conversations with deans at Texas universities went nowhere.

"The dean at Austin said he loved the idea but had no money," Taylor says.

In 1997 the Everest Quartet dissolved. Today, both violinists are members of the Cleveland Orchestra, the violist belongs to the Houston Symphony, and Taylor plays with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Taylor says he has no regrets.

"Chicago's a wonderful city, and the orchestra works with the best conductors and soloists working in the world today," he explains. "I play chamber music and perform concertos with regional orchestras. I live an incredibly rich, full, musical life now."

Ironically, the Everest's timing was off by about two years. Shortly after Taylor and his colleagues moved east, the University of Texas at Austin received funding to hire an ensemble and chose the Miró Quartet, which may be the highest-paid young string quartet in the country at annual salaries of \$80,000. (Some faculty residencies pay half that amount.)

Given the growing popularity of university residencies, there are more opportunities than ever before to be part of a professional string quartet. Yet many of those residencies require long moves away from the musical hot spots where quartets typically meet and train.

"Chamber music is still my first love," says Taylor, "and the thing I'm best at is playing cello in a string quartet. At 23, you're willing to sacrifice absolutely everything for a chamber-music career. As you get older, you think about location, your personal life, financial stability.

"It isn't a coincidence that most quartets are young."

This is the last of a three-part series on professional chamber musicians making it in the classical-music marketplace. □