



IN JUST FIVE YEARS, THE BELCEA QUARTET HAS ESTABLISHED ITSELF AS ONE OF THE LEADING CHAMBER MUSIC ENSEMBLES IN THE WORLD - AND LANDED AN EMI RECORDING DEAL. JESSICA DUCHEN IS DULY IMPRESSED

TEAM SPIRIT

To any aspiring chamber music player, the story of the Belcea Quartet looks like a fairy tale come true. The rise and rise of this young group is pretty much without precedent – and, far from resorting to gimmickry or excessive marketing, they have done it all through the quality of their musicianship.

The group formed only in 1998 but became resident quartet at London's Wigmore Hall in October 2001 and won the Royal Philharmonic Society chamber music award that same year. And their stunning debut disc – quartets by Debussy, Ravel and Dutilleux – has led to an ongoing recording relationship with EMI.

The Belceas have plenty of ideas for original ways to develop their work but the foursome – violinists Corina Belcea from Romania and Laura Samuel from England, violist Krzysztof Chorzelski from Poland and cellist Alasdair Tait from Scotland – are united by their sheer dedication to chamber music. All of them had played in other quartets as students before coming together and finding that the chemistry worked.

'Laura and I met in our first week at the Royal College of Music [RCM] and soon started playing quartets together, with a different violist and cellist,' Corina says. 'Krzysztof joined us a year-and-a-half later and Alasdair in 1998.'

What attracted Chorzelski to the strange, intense existence of a full-time string quartet was the overwhelming appeal of the repertoire: 'I don't think we stop being amazed at how lucky we are to be working on a daily basis on this wonderful music.'

The element of interpersonal skills that string quartets inevitably need was also important to him: 'It's about communication and dealing with people on a very intimate level because you are working so closely together. That's an important skill in life.'

'In solo work you're on your own and you have to have incredible strength of will to do that,' adds Tait. 'The thing I love about quartets is that you're constantly being challenged by other people and forced to reassess how you're playing and what your outlook is. Hopefully that keeps a freshness to your own musical growth. And even if you're feeling at a low ebb, you know there are other people to spark off – you're not only relying on your own energy.'

The four come from extraordinarily different backgrounds, both nationally and musically.

But far from hindering their collaboration, they feel this is something positive.

'The ability to interact with other musicians whose natural musicianship is different from yours can be so enriching and can complement what each one of us has in themselves,' says Chorzelski. 'Working together helps each of us to complement ourselves as musicians with the qualities of others. It's a great way of developing as a musician.'

'We're all incredibly different personalities and have different lives outside the quartet,' says Samuel, 'and it's a constant challenge to try to fulfil all those wishes individually yet have the same direction as a group. Part of that is getting to know each other so well that we know when to leave each other alone!'

While they were still a student group, the Belceas were taken on by the Young Concert Artists Trust (YCAT). That proved their main launching pad and they can't give the organisation enough praise or thanks.

'It was absolutely crucial,' says Chorzelski, 'at the point when you need a lot of encouragement and exposure to different concert venues but also to have sensitive guidance from your agents rather than being thrown into the commercial world.'

Tait points to the good sense that they learned with YCAT's help: 'One of the best things is the way they pace building things up. That's something we still try and do; we'd never perform a work for the first time in the Wigmore Hall. Also we learned that if something comes in but it doesn't feel like the right time for it, don't do it!'

YCAT helped establish the Belceas with their current management, the London office of Hannover-based Konzertdirektion Schmid.

'YCAT were involved in a sort of parental way, making sure that the transition to the professional agency was smooth. We did make the right choice thanks to that guidance,' says Chorzelski. A further boost was a stint with the BBC Radio 3 New Generations Scheme from 1999 to 2001. Competitions also played an important part; the group won first prize in the International String Quartet Competitions in Osaka and Bordeaux and entered contests in London and Banff.

'The London competition was our first and that was a very scary experience but we learned a lot from it,' Belcea remembers.

At that early stage, says Samuel, 'It was such a shock to the system for us to have all that repertoire in our fingers at the same time – for instance, at Osaka we had to play the Berg *Lyric Suite*, Ravel, two Haydns and Beethoven op.130 with the fugue.

'It was completely another world to play all this under such pressure,' she adds. 'It felt horrific at the time but it was a great learning curve for us. And also it was incredibly useful to come into contact with people on the jury and hear their feedback about what we needed to work on and what direction we should be going in. At the London competition, every quartet that entered had the chance to speak to three jury members afterwards and that was hugely useful – so it was all worthwhile.'

Quite apart from the concerts and exposure that can result from competitions, the Belceas found that the hothouse of peers and potential teachers was perhaps the most valuable aspect.

'We met a lot of our teachers through competitions,' Chorzelski says, 'and also made some ongoing friendships with the other competitors.'

Now the quartet is steaming into 2004 at full tilt. Its next recording (hot on the heels of a stunning Brahms CD – the First Quartet and the String Quintet op.111 with Thomas Kakuska of the Alban Berg Quartet) features Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet with composer Thomas Adès at the piano. 'He's busy for the next few years but we do hope to be able to ask him to write something for us one day,' remarks Belcea.

Meanwhile there are other premieres to enjoy, including a new quartet by Huw Watkins (a friend of the Belceas), which will take place at the Wigmore Hall – 'it'll be very interesting to have a new piece from someone who knows us so well and is of our generation.' They are also teaching on a summer course for young quartets at the RCM. 'That'll be the first time we've done anything like that in such a concentrated way,' remarks Samuel. 'We're excited about meeting some serious young groups and spending some time with them.'

Recently they've enjoyed taking part in *Music in the Round* – a series started by the Lindsay Quartet in which the group, casually attired, performs with the audience on all sides. The players rotate positions between pieces so that the audience experiences a different aural perspective each time.