



GOLDNER STRING QUARTET

Launched in 1995, the Goldner String Quartet has performed regularly together since 1991 as the four string players from the highly acclaimed Australia Ensemble (resident at the University of New South Wales).

The quartet is named after Richard Goldner, renowned pedagogue, inventor, and founder of the original Musica Viva Australia. The players are all well-known to Australian and international audiences through solo performances and recordings. All have occupied principal positions in organisations such as the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Australian Chamber Orchestra.

The Quartet regularly appears at major music festivals around Australia in addition to national tours for Musica Viva. The members of the quartet have been a mainstay of the Australian Festival

of Chamber Music in Townsville since 1993 and have just returned from highly successful appearances at music festivals in Finland, France and the U.K.

In 1997 the Goldner String Quartet made its debut at the Wigmore Hall in London, with return engagements there in 1999 and 2003. They have appeared at the UK festivals of Cheltenham, Newbury and Brighton and at the Festival du Sceaux in France. In October 2001 the quartet made its American debut with concerts at the prestigious 92nd St Y in New York and in Washington DC. The Goldners have undertaken extensive tours of New Zealand, and performed at the Jeju Music Festival in Korea in 2006.

The Goldners have collaborated with many international artists including pianists Boris Berman, Philippe Cassard, Daniel Adni, Maureen Jones, Irina Schnittke, fortepianist Malcolm Bilson, cellists, Alexander Ivashkin, Robert Cohen, Torleif Thedeen, Young-Chang Cho, Philippe Muller and Yehuda Hanani, violists Rainer Moog and Brett Dean, violinists James Buswell, Oleh Krysa and guitarist Slava Grigoryan.

More recently the quartet has collaborated with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in their festivals celebrating the works of Beethoven and Shostakovich.

The Goldner Quartet received the Australian Music Centre Award in 2000, for the 'Best Performance of an Australian Composition', for their performance of Carl Vine's Quartet No.3.

The instruments of the Quartet are maintained by Mr Gabor Balogh, Master Violin Repairer and Restorer (Sydney).

INTERVIEW WITH DENE OLDING

by Leonie Conolan

Leonie Conolan: Dene, I am sure many of our readers recognise you as one of Australia's top soloists and as concertmaster the Sydney Symphony but today it is the contribution that you have

made to chamber music that I would like to focus upon.

You formed your own string quartet in 1995. Could you tell us something of the background to setting up this group?

Dene Olding: When I was a student at the Juilliard School in New York, I had a room-mate who was mad keen about string quartets and would be always talking about the Beethoven string quartets and how great they were. I really had no idea at the time what he was talking about as I had only limited quartet experience and had played only one early Beethoven quartet.

Quartet playing was obligatory at the school as part of the course but my experience with the student quartets to which I was assigned was varied to say the least and it didn't awaken me to the treasures to be found in the repertoire. There is a fine tradition of quartet playing at the school and most of your readers will know of the Juilliard Quartet which has been in residence there for about 60 years.

It would be fair to say though, that a large number of the students at that time were there in order to become the best possible virtuoso player. There was much competition and the standard of the best students was world-class. I just couldn't see, not having such advanced musical taste as my room-mate, why you would want to be playing quartets when you could be learning all the great virtuoso concertos in the violin literature. Mind you, I think it is absolutely necessary for any violinist to master these works to strengthen their technique and to master the instrument.

Some years on in my career, I met and married Irena Morozov. We were both working with the Australia Ensemble, resident at the University of New South Wales (as we still do) and had both played together in the Australian Chamber Orchestra. The Australia Ensemble consisted of three string players at that time and we soon recognised the need to have a permanent second violinist with whom we could more regularly play the great piano quintets, clarinet quintets and numerous other mixed ensemble pieces. Thus the seeds of a quartet began to germinate.



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Naturally, we explored the quartet possibilities on our Australia Ensemble programs from time to time and realised that the chemistry of the four players was producing a good result. My wife Irena for years had shied away from quartets as she was wary of the ramifications of married couples rehearsing together and often being critical of each other - something which is a necessary part of the rehearsal process. This is doubly dangerous for us as we are two married couples.

After eminent music patron Ken Tribe suggested we do all the Beethoven quartets, we began to think seriously about playing quartets more often and realised that we would have to create a separate group to the Australia Ensemble as the string quartet could only be an occasional item on its particular brand of repertoire.

It only remained to find a name. We didn't want a geographical name and yet we wanted one which had some meaning for Australia. We all agreed that we should honour Richard Goldner's outstanding contribution to Australian musical life as founder of Musica Viva and also because he had exerted a musical influence on all of us in various ways.

It is ironic that after all these years, my quartet-loving room-mate has gone in a completely different direction and is now a highly respected Professor of Violin in the US, and quartet playing and chamber music is such a large part of my musical life.

The other members of the quartet are Dimity Hall, violin, Irena Morozov, viola and Julian Smiles, cello. I am really fortunate to be able to work with these players as I feel, and many audience members agree with me, that we are all evenly matched and our personalities are such that they suit the individual's role in the group. We are not excitable types in rehearsal, thank God; otherwise marital tensions would come to the fore.

We all are fortunate to have fine-sounding instruments. I play a 1720 Joseph Guarnerius, Dimity plays a Nicolo Gagliano from 1781, Irena an A.E. Smith from 1947 and Julian an 18th century Italian cello.

We have always prided ourselves on being a "big project" group. Our first intensive

series of concerts was at Musica Viva's weekend festival at the Domaine Chandon winery in the Yarra Valley. For this we played the last 11 Beethoven string quartets in four concerts within 36 hours. Many of these we were performing for the first time which made it twice as difficult but it proved to ourselves that we were capable of this kind of activity.

In 1999, we decided to present an anthology of the 20th century quartet literature in ten concerts. We offered it to the Adelaide Festival and they took it on for the 2000 event. I think it remains one of our most difficult projects – ten concerts, one for each decade over ten days! The repertoire contained some of the most difficult pieces ever written - a cross section of the greatest music from the century.

I remember an elderly lady who sat in the front row for every concert, decade by decade. At the end she had tears in her eyes and said to us that it was like "...watching my whole life unfold before me again". I was very touched by this and it reminded me of why we all actually bother to perform great music. It has a way of transporting people to another plane and must be beneficial for the soul.

A by-product of this intense preparation for big events was that we added large numbers of works to our repertoire in a relatively short time and hence we have a sizeable list now. We have also performed a complete cycle of Beethoven's quartets. This is the Everest for quartet players and after some unsuccessful attempts to realise this ambition, we were finally able to present them in 2004 in Sydney. Again, not wanting to shy away from a challenge, we agreed to record them all "live". The recordings will soon be released on the ABC Classics label.

We have been really fortunate to have had help from Musica Viva Australia and the Australia Council for touring overseas and around Australia. We can now plan at least one international tour each year and regular tours in Australia every other year. We all have other activities beside quartet playing which naturally limits the number of concerts per year, and I think we all feel



DENE OLDING

that with family commitments there is a limit to how much travel we wish to do. This is the eternal dilemma for a quartet as the really busy quartets constantly travel and rarely stay in one city for very long. Add to that life a quartet consisting of two married couples and it is clear that that lifestyle is not for us.

LC: You obviously enjoy playing all styles of music. I know you have played some works by Australian composers. Do you also commission new works for the Quartet?

DO: We have played a good representation of Australian composers, although I think there is much music yet for us to explore. Our name is most often associated with Peter Sculthorpe's music and our recordings of his music are now almost complete. We have also played music by Carl Vine, Nigel Westlake, Nigel Butterley, Richard Meale, Matthew Hindson and Ross Edwards including many premieres and recordings of these composers. I am happy to say that there are quite a few commissions in the pipeline as well.

LC: The appreciation and interest in chamber music seems to have changed in recent years. Do you feel there are now more opportunities available for students in the chamber music field?

DO: There is definitely a future in Australia now for young musicians contemplating a career in chamber music. When I began playing with the Australia Ensemble in 1982, the list of professional ensembles in this country was not a long one. Now I notice many more young ensembles attempting

the difficult life of a chamber musician. I think that there is still not enough emphasis in the schools on chamber music, but is generally better than in the past.

LC: Does the quartet feel it has a place in the education of young musicians?

DO: We were involved quite extensively with the Australian National Academy of Music in Melbourne a few years ago and that is tremendously rewarding work. I think it is wonderful to reach this stage of my career and have some sense of perspective and overview of the whole music profession and to try and help young talented players to the best of your ability.

An interesting project this year for us will be a string quartet camp during the Easter holidays which will be held at the Gold Coast under the auspices of the Australian Youth Orchestra. I think these intensive courses over some days or weeks are fantastic stimulation for students and they create a momentum and energy all their own when so many like-minded people come together.

LC: You all sound very busy people. What are your plans for the rest of 2007?

DO: During February we will be touring Italy and the UK. This is our first time in Italy as a quartet and the UK is becoming a regular route for us. We have a long association with the Wigmore Hall and we will again give two concerts there on this tour. We are also going to record works by Ernest Bloch with Australian pianist, Piers Lane whilst in the UK.

Our major venture for this year will be to finally inaugurate a Goldner string quartet series in Sydney at Angel Place. I think it is overdue for us to have a regular presence in Sydney and possibly other cities in the future which will give us a showcase to present works that reflect our typical style of program. I would define that as a major early 20th century work mixed with classical and a more modern, often Australian, work. Another area in which we would like to extend our repertoire is those works from the Romantic and late Romantic era which I think is due for a revival.

LC: This has given our readers an insight into the busy life of the String Quartet. What do you do to just relax?

DO: My family is my absolute priority in life and it is wonderful to forget about music for a while and spend a lazy summer holiday with my wife, watching our son grow with each passing year and to visit parents and other relations. These are the things that matter and I feel most fortunate to have the family that I have. My parents are both well-known pianists and in addition to a great home life growing up, it was a fantastic advantage to my musical education to be surrounded with music from a young age. I am constantly amazed that musicians, whom you must count as perhaps the most co-ordinated individuals on the planet, are often hopeless when it comes to more physical activities like sport. It mystifies me as I think of all these things as the same. It is all a question of timing and rhythm. Surely that is bread and butter for a musician.

In the last five or six years, I have developed a passion for the Japanese martial art, Aikido. It has taught me many techniques about using one's energy to the fullest and has so many parallels with violin playing that it is uncanny. Aikido is based partly on Jiu-jitsu and partly on the techniques of samurai sword fighting. I think the textbooks for holding the bow and for using a Japanese

sword could almost be interchangeable. Besides all of that, it is great for confidence building and for keeping fit. In the last few years, I would rate achieving a high rank in Aikido as the most satisfying thing that I have accomplished as far as my personal development goes.

One of my fellow Aikido students in my class has the surname "Heifetz", would you believe! He actually has great physical strength and I am always mindful of this when training with him. On one occasion, I was not fast enough during a certain Aikido technique and he actually hurt my arm. As I heard a strange pop in my elbow, a newspaper headline flashed before my eyes (presuming any paper would be interested in this particular story), "Heifetz breaks Olding's arm!!" It would be almost worth it to see that in print.

LC: That's a great story, Dene. Good luck with your tour and we look forward to hearing more about the Goldner Quartet in future issues of *Stringendo*.

For more information about performances of the Goldner Quartet please visit the Website: www.goldnerquartet.com
Latest CD's by the quartet are available from ABC Classics at your local record store.

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