EMPATHY FOR UNCERTAINTY

Guarneri String Quartet members reflect on decades of learning, teaching, and performing

BY HEIDI WALESON

'In a world that is so highly competitive, with the standards of playing so high and so many people who play well, the world belongs to the ones who have the broadest talent and the broadest view of music.'

Arnold Steinhardt, the first violinist of the forty-three-year-old Guarneri String Quartet, has been on the faculty of The Curtis Institute of Music since 1968, but even now, at the age of seventy, he says, "I walk into the school as [if] a scared kid of seventeen, away from home for the first time, never before exposed to the wider world of music. When I look at the students, I empathize with them, and the uncertainty of it all. When I ask [the graduating ones], 'What are you going to do next year?' and they say, 'I don't know,' my heart goes out to them, as well as feeling the joy that they are about to experience as musicians."

Mr. Steinhardt's Guarneri Quartet colleagues Michael Tree (viola) and Peter Wiley (cello) share that double experience: All were Curtis students and are now Curtis teachers. Teaching between two and eight students, often in partnership with other faculty, the quartet members carve time out of their touring schedules to get to Philadelphia, once a week if possible.

For all of them, the process of teaching is important to their lives as performers. Mr. Tree says, "When I teach, I'm learning from my students. They'll come up with ideas or fingerings, and I say that I'm going right back to New York to incorporate that into my own work."

For Mr. Wiley, teaching at Curtis is "a thrill. It's an honor to be invited to teach at my alma mater. I drive there every week from my home in Connecticut, and it is never a chore. The kids are so gifted, so into the music, so eager to learn."

It's a kind of circle: The Guarneri Quartet members are giving back to the Curtis students the rich lessons of a long career that had its roots on Rittenhouse Square. Mr. Steinhardt, Mr. Tree, and Guarneri second violinist John Dalley were students at Curtis at the same time, playing chamber music with each other for fun, all graduating in the 1950s. When they met again at the Marlboro Music Festival some years later, their shared backgrounds and love of chamber music brought them together with cellist David Soyer (more than a decade older and not a Curtis grad) to launch the Guarneri String Quartet in 1964. Mr. Steinhardt, Mr. Tree, and Mr. Soyer joined the faculty at Curtis in 1968, and Mr. Soyer brought along his thirteen-year-old student, Peter Wiley, whom he had been teaching while the quartet had its first residency, at Harpur College in Binghamton, N.Y. In 1999, when Mr. Soyer decided that he no longer could manage the punishing travel required by the quartet's schedule and the three remaining members decided to go on, the only cellist they wanted was Wiley. "We've known him since he was eleven years old," says Mr. Steinhardt.

Chamber music was not a typical path for a musician during Mr. Steinhardt's and Mr. Tree's conservatory days. Musicians aspired to solo or orchestral careers; chamber music was something that you did for fun. Yet things were changing. Aided by the Marlboro Festival, spiritual home of former Curtis director Rudolf Serkin, a career in chamber music was becoming a legitimate aspiration, and the Guarneri Quartet was launched into a world that was ripe for it. Along with the Juilliard Quartet, the Guarneri proved that an American string quartet could be enormously successful. The quartet quickly developed a following in the United States and abroad, with a full touring schedule and recording program. Its success inspired others; now, dozens of string quartets and chamber ensembles fill the musical landscape.

Arnold Steinhardt, who grew up in Los Angeles and studied with Ivan Galamian at Curtis, sees a very changed world today. In his books, *Indivisible by Four* and *Violin Dreams*, he paints a compelling self-portrait of a young violinist bent on a solo career. And although he won the Leventritt Competition in 1958 and five years later took the bronze medal in the Queen Elisabeth Competition, his first job out of Curtis—at the invitation of George Szell, who was on the Leventritt jury—was as assistant concert-master of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The Guarneri String Quartet: (from left) Arnold Steinhardt, John Dalley, Michael Tree, and Peter Wiley
~ PHOTO: STEVE J. SHERMAN

"Things were very compartmentalized," Mr. Steinhardt says. "Orchestra players weren't soloists. A soloist never played chamber music. Now the lines are blurred, if not gone. In a world that is so highly competitive, with the standards of playing so high and so many people who play well, the world belongs to the ones who have the broadest talent and the broadest view of music. I encourage students to play viola if they can. They should play chamber music, study the repertoire. They should read a lot—some musicians get up and talk before they play, and they have to do that well, or keep their mouths shut. Some become entrepreneurs, and start their own series or festivals. Places like Curtis are now talking about career development. In my time, it was a much more narrow focus. You studied your repertoire, and then went out into the cold, cruel world."

Michael Tree entered Curtis at the age of twelve and spent ten years there, studying violin with Efrem Zimbalist and others. (Like his fellow quartet violinists, he also played viola, and he took the viola seat when the quartet was formed.) Mr. Tree particularly recalls the presence of so many great performer-teachers. "I'd walk into Curtis, hear Carlos Salzedo, the harpist, giving a lesson. Next door was Gregor Piatigorsky, the cellist. Across the hall was William Primrose. Downstairs: Efrem Zimbalist. Mr. Serkin, Mr. Horszowski—all were concertizing widely. That's how we were taught. We were taught how to improve in the absence of having great teachers there all the time."

The fact that these titans were often away had a hidden benefit. "A great influence at Curtis when I was young was Marcel Tabuteau, the principal oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra for many years," says Mr. Tree, whose string class was taught by Tabuteau. "He would say that he was not trying to teach us anything other than how to teach ourselves. I think that is what musical pedagogy is about. As someone said, 'Teaching is the art of assisting discovery.'"

Performer-teachers, Mr. Tree adds, "are constantly learning, adjusting our work to concert conditions." That real-world element can also be modeled in startlingly immediate ways. "Recently, we gave a master class in Utah and heard three fine young quartets," he says. "In the act of coaching and teaching, they were able to hear us disagree with one another, which indicated how quartets are expected to behave. We don't have one unanimous voice dictating tempo or dynamics. We spend a lot of our rehearsal hours in discussion or disagreement. That's still true, even after forty-five years, because our own feelings have become hardened, and we're even more convinced."

Like Mr. Steinhardt, Peter Wiley began his musical career as an orchestra player, first in the Pittsburgh Symphony, after graduating from Curtis in 1974, and then for eight years as principal cello in the Cincinnati Symphony. In 1979 he returned to Marlboro as a "seasoned professional," and that experience, he says, "had a lot to do with my ultimate decision [in 1984] to leave the orchestra and see what would happen. I stepped into a void and moved to New York, not knowing. As a musician, you're often looking at an empty space, and you can't predict what you are going to be professionally. The only thing you can do is keep your relationship with music, and what you are looking for in music, vivid and strong. That's the only thing you can control."

In 1987 Mr. Wiley replaced the retiring Bernard Greenhouse in the Beaux Arts Trio, an invitation facilitated by the trio's violinist, Isidore Cohen, a fellow Marlboro regular. After eleven years, Mr. Wiley left the trio, formed the piano quartet Opus One with some friends (including Curtis faculty members Ida Kavafian and Steven Tenenbom), and started planning a freelance life. Then the call came from Mr. Soyer.

"I never imagined anyone else playing in the Guarneri Quartet—it was those four guys," Mr. Wiley says. "When David Soyer called me, I said no. I spoke with David a lot about it for a month, before I even spoke to the other three." It took three months for him to agree.

"The guys wanted to play, and they wanted to play with me. I wondered, was it stranger for them or for me? I remember that first rehearsal, when I sat in that chair in Arnold's apartment in New York, and I thought, 'No one has ever done this but David Soyer.'"

After the 2008–09 season, Mr. Wiley will again "step into the void." The quartet, whose remaining founding members are now all in their seventies, have decided to disband the

group after its forty-fifth season. Why that one, particularly? "I thought it would be nice to go to a nice round number, like one hundred," jokes Mr. Steinhardt. "I look across at the guys. They're still sounding very good, and I hope we are sounding good as a quartet. That's the time to wrap it up, rather than saying, 'We used to sound good,' and having our audience say that. Even though we can all play our instruments well, and we're all in good health, playing quartets is like being a watchmaker—this fine, detailed work, and little critical motions don't get easier with time. We had never talked about it before. People talk about five-year plans; we've always had a one-year plan—then a no-year plan if nobody hired us! People have continued to ask us, but it seemed natural to stop. We all feel blessed to have done this for so many years."

The quartet's final season is likely to involve a much heavier touring schedule than that of recent years, so that all their presenters can get them one last time. It may well be closer to the one hundred dates a year that they were doing in the early days, when they were young and hungry, than the fifty or so dates that are more the norm now. And when it's over? "I'm going to join a heavy-metal band," says Mr. Steinhardt, jokingly.

A lesson with Peter Wiley
~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Mr. Wiley, who is happy that the quartet continued as long as it did and proud of its remarkable legacy, says, "Here we are again. I'm fifty-two years old, and I don't know where I'll be in five years. I'm not worried. It's the nature of what we do. I'll keep making music."

They all plan to continue teaching, at Curtis and elsewhere. Their example should also continue to inspire students to make chamber music a part of their lives. "Chamber music is a really critical part of learning to play with others," Mr. Wiley says. "It's about learning to listen, when to give and when to take. When I was younger, I was so concerned about how I sounded—it was all me—that I was not hearing a lot of what was going on around me."

Mr. Tree concurs, adding that one of the most wonderful things about chamber music is learning to "expect the unexpected." He says, "We're self-governing and unconducted and the spontaneity is still very much a part of every performance, even after forty-five years. We hope that that happens. All the rehearsing in the world is wonderful, but once the bullets are flying, when you are out there, you never know what to expect. Having to shift gears, and do things differently—that's what we enjoy most."

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Remembering Oboist John Minsker (1912–2007)

BY DAVID MCGILL

John Minsker (Oboe '35) privately taught many of the most illustrious oboists of the latter half of the twentieth century before they studied at Curtis with his own teacher and Philadelphia Orchestra colleague, the incomparable Marcel Tabuteau—among them Louis Rosenblatt ('51), Alfred Genovese ('53), William Criss ('42), and John Mack ('51).

At the request of Curtis Director John de Lancie, Mr. Minsker—or John, as he told me to call him shortly after my Curtis graduation—imparted his musical knowledge to a new generation of musicians from 1979 to 1985 in his woodwind classes. One could not imagine a more dedicated foot soldier for the cause of the Tabuteau tradition. In 2004, at the age of ninety-two, John wrote to Curtis President/Director Gary Graffman: "I declined [de Lancie's] first request that I teach at the Institute, and reconsidered only after … it became clear to me that I owed it to Mr. Tabuteau's memory to aid in the preservation of his pedagogy for at least one more generation of students. I attempted to instill in them the feeling that they were part of a long tradition of excellence at the Institute with the hope that they, in turn, would wish to pass this on to their students. … I refused all monetary compensation for this six-year period as an instructor."

As solo English horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra (1936–59), John became known for his long-lined phrasing and magnificent tone. He also served as solo English horn of the Detroit Symphony (1934–36). Upon