

# Premiere sound

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There are two major ideologies in string quartet playing, though many groups aim for some kind of overlap.

One is that the quartet must be homogenous, that togetherness and single-mindedness are key to a uniform ensemble and beautiful playing. There are top string quartets that have done well by this method, including the renowned Tokyo String Quartet that visited Rochester in late January.

The second is that each player is an individual, and with only four players in a string quartet, each should have a distinct personality and be given the freedom of expression.

The Orion String Quartet, one of the country's most sought-after groups, subscribes to the latter. The quartet-in-residence at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center plays with brightness and intensity; bold colors fly out of the score. Each performance feels fresh and spontaneous. When the group paired up with Bill T. Jones' innovative dance company, suddenly its jubilant playing had physical representation.

It's none of that so-called stuffy classical music, even if members are playing Beethoven for the millionth time (they've been recording the entire Beethoven quartet cycle in sparkling performances). This year, they celebrate their 20th anniversary, and hope to release their latest CD (which they've just finished editing) of the late Beethoven quartets at a special concert in April at Lincoln Center.

"They're an incredible group. They've made great contributions to the string quartet world as performers," says Margery Hwang, assistant professor of string chamber music at the Eastman School of Music. "Rochester is lucky to have them here to celebrate their anniversary."

More times than not, you'll hear this group perform music you've never heard before — quartets by Chick Corea, Leon Kirchner, John Harbison and even Wynton Marsalis. Then you only hope after the gripping performance that the piece becomes a staple of string quartet repertoire.

"Getting the balance between putting things tidily together, which is very difficult, with the musical impact, we often go through to get the musical impact down first, which is dangerous," says violinist Daniel Phillips, who takes turns playing first and second violin with his brother, Todd Phillips. "In a quartet, if you play something a little out of tune or not together, everyone gasps."

Rest assured, this group rarely falters. These are four strong players with international careers as chamber musicians, soloists and teachers (each teaching at the major conservatories in the New York City area). They didn't earn careers as a string quartet, the way many fine young

musicians are doing today, and though the quartet is a priority, each keeps a busy schedule with other engagements.

"That's the plus for us. We formed the quartet having perfectly fine careers as they were," says Phillips. "This wasn't a cash cow, money-making thing for us. We're doing the quartet as an idealistic venture."

On Saturday night, they'll do what's expected from an idealistic, world-class quartet: perform a world premiere. Now don't get scared at that prospect. New music can be a gamble, but Phillips is positive that Lowell Liebermann's String Quartet no. 4 will be "immediately welcoming."

Liebermann writes using the familiar tonal system of the late, great Romantics, akin to Shostakovich or Prokofiev, weaving in his own personal exploration. The Ying Quartet will also premiere a Liebermann string quartet next weekend.

"I think audiences, when they find out a piece is written in the next decade or so, they shouldn't be scared anymore," says Phillips. "This newer wave of composition is nice; it's inviting and listenable."

The performance this Saturday night is presented by the Canandaigua Lake Chamber Music Festival, a summer festival with a couple of winter warm-up concerts.

Phillips serves as artistic adviser, and the Orion's Saturday performance will be joined by festival directors, violist Edward Klorman, a Brighton native, and cellist Amy Sue Barston, for a reading of the Brahms Sextet in G Major, op. 36.

