

**June 23, 2012**

**Quartet tackles some of Beethoven's toughest works**

BY LUKE QUINTON

Violinist Daniel Ching is stretching against the stage in the dim and empty auditorium as the other members of the Miró Quartet chat, get snacks and break out their instruments for the first time this morning. Ching smooths rosin on his bow's hair, then whips it through the air a few times, like Zorro.

"We haven't played this in two weeks," he says.

This morning is day four in the Miró Quartet's recording of their next record, Beethoven's famous Razumovsky quartets, three fiendishly difficult pieces that, at the time he wrote them, in the early 1800s, his players complained that the long sections were too difficult.

"Oh," Beethoven reportedly told the musicians, "They are not for you, but for a later age."

Some 200 years later, in Jessen Auditorium on the University of Texas campus, the Beethoven quartets — considered a benchmark recording for any string quartet — haven't gotten any easier.

And recording them? There's absolutely nothing easy about that.

When you pull out a classical CD from your collection or turn the radio dial to classical music station KMFA, what you're hearing comes from a recording session like this. But what most don't realize are the lengths required to put down those sounds for posterity.

In summary, here they are:

One, learn three of the most challenging pieces of music ever written and polish them to a performance level.

Two, secure rare period instruments from generous donors and travel across North America to personally accompany the 18th-century instruments to Austin. Try not to fixate on the instruments' value, which, as a group that includes a Stradivarius violin and a Tononi cello played by the virtuoso Pablo Casals, is in the tens of millions of dollars.

Three, play the piece for former teachers and mentors across the country, asking for their feedback to crystallize your ensemble's interpretation.

Four, fly in renowned producer and record about one movement a day for 11 days while being prepared to irrevocably alter your interpretation of the piece while battling your ego, musicianship and reputation.

Five, raise $30,000 yourself to cover the recording costs through the generosity of private donors.

On the stage in Jessen are circular floor lamps, gently glowing on the four players as they prepare to tackle today's movement. Ching and second violinist William Fedkenheuer are in sock feet, as microphones lean just above their music stands and two other mikes tower discreetly above the fray. There's a mess of wires spitting toward the lip of the stage. The musicians are chatting to themselves when it becomes clear that there's a fifth voice — the small speaker on the chair in front of them is talking to them. And they're talking back.

It's Da-Hong Seetoo, the album's producer, like a disembodied conductor. He sings an arpeggio and says, "Start from there."

The musicians — UT's faculty string quartet-in-residence since 2003 — charge through the Beethoven with a trademark intensity. They're animated players, seeking out each other's eyes. It's eerily still in an empty hall, not at all like watching a fleeting live performance with hundreds of others in the seats around you. Now, however, the seats are dark, and it's vital not to make a sound.

Jessen was chosen because it's a little more private than Bates Recital Hall, the nucleus of UT's Butler School of Music.

And Jessen is tucked discreetly away on campus. With the spring semester just over, the building's emptied out and quiet.

There are unusual considerations. The air conditioner in Jessen is quieter than in Bates, and the room is insulated enough to guard against sounds as commonplace as planes overhead — a sound that could devastate a day's work.

When the first movement of the morning ends, one of several long movements, hovering around the 10-minute mark, the guys head downstairs to meet the man behind the curtain — or rather, the man in the basement.

The basement room is a place out of time. Midcentury lights dot the ceiling and red carpet squares lay over a red concrete floor. A thick cable comes through a crack in the door, feeding into Da-Hong's computer.

"All they do is invent new vehicles for MSG," Ching says, picking through the room's impressive lineup of Asian snacks including fish-flavored puffs and candy.

When everyone is seated, Da-Hong starts up the playback. The analysis begins.

"It sounds stressed," Ching says. "We're not stressed — it should sound happy."

"What were our two words for that section?" asks violist John Largess, looking through the sticky notes from the famed cellist David Finckel of the Emerson Quartet, one of several mentors the Miró consulted in preparation for the recording project. "Playful, charming?"

"Rollicking," someone says.

As all four players sit behind Da-Hong, their paper scores in hand, Da-Hong follows on a digital tablet, marking sections and checking for bowings with an invisible bow. Comments come in and out.

"Yikes," says cellist Joshua Gindele.

"That presto comes too soon," someone adds.

"We're not subdividing."

"I think we're all overplaying."

This is not normal listening. It's a line-by-line debate.

"We're not juicing those chords," someone says. "We're just pushing the bow."

Before long the recording ends. The guys start to tease Da-Hong, who, they claim, is just waiting to unleash a characteristically scathing remark. Perhaps, they suggest, he's on his best behavior with a reporter in the room.

"When he goes ‘dohn-doo' you go ‘dee dee'" Da-Hong tells one of the violinists. "It sounds bad." "I thought ‘H' was too loud," Fedkenheuer says of one spot.

"‘H' was way too loud," says Da-Hong.

Before long the critique comes to an end.

So what happens next? They walk upstairs to play it again. It's a bit like building your own home, but deciding to make renovations half way through.

"This is no live recording," explains Largess. "In recording you're making a 3-D hologram of the piece you can listen to for the rest of your life."

If there is one relief for everyone involved in making this hologram, it is "patching," the process that is exactly what it sounds like: taking several recordings and then surgically transplanting some of the troubled spots with superior versions.

If that sounds surprising, it shouldn't be. In the age of auto-tuning notes to make a pop singer's voice sing in tune, there's a different standard for perfection.

"We are conditioned to listen to it super-refined," says Da-Hong.

And it's a standard to which he is fully dedicated. "If you want to listen to the whole thing, go to the concert!"

Da-Hong, whether from a disembodied speaker or in person, is the quartet's voice of reason, an excellent player by his own right. And he acts as a sort of quality control.

"Da-Hong's won nine Grammys," says Gindele. "The guy knows what he's doing."

Da-Hong's been over this work many times before.

Does he see something in this version that marks it as the work of the Miró?

Absolutely, he says. Connoisseurs "should be able to listen to a version and say, ‘Ah, this is the Miró Quartet.'"

A few weeks after the recording session, Gindele and Fedkenheuer are sitting in a central Austin coffeehouse looking much more relaxed and even a little tanned from a mini-vacation. They were both charged with personally accompanying the stunning (and staggeringly expensive) borrowed instruments back to their owners in Boston.

But, they explain, it may have been Ching who took returning the instruments the hardest. Before he brought in the borrowed Stradivarius, made in 1711, for the last day of recording, he'd made a fatal mistake: "Guys, I played my own instrument this morning," he said. "It was horrible!"

"Last I heard," smiles Gindele, "He was in a Chicago violin shop."

"It's hard to give up," Fedkenheuer says. "A great Strad has been vibrating constantly for 200 years! That's 200 years of the best (violin) builders in the business plus the best players."

When the Miró releases the album this fall on UT's imprint, Longhorn Records, it will mark their second recording in Beethoven's quartet cycle. Having recorded Beethoven's Opus 18, his early quartets, the forthcoming album records his Opus 59, his dynamic and shifting middle period. The idea was "to record the Opus in more or less the same age group when (Beethoven) wrote them," says Gindele.

But just because they're veterans doesn't mean this recording was a breeze.

For Fedkenheuer, who joined the Miró just a year ago after taking over duties from Sandy Yamamoto, things are still a little new.

When Gindele was struggling to master a brutally difficult passage in one session, Fedkenheuer says he wasn't sure whether it was his place to step in, as the quartet watched Gindele become more frustrated.

"I learned so much," says Fedkenheuer. He noticed Ching and Largess stayed silent, and yet, after a while, Fedkenheuer did make a suggestion. Although it didn't hurt, it wasn't about to pull Gindele out of a tailspin. "They're changing a lot because I'm there instead of Sandy," Fedkenheuer says.

For all this time, these fleeting moments of beauty, and difficult moments of frustration, work and emotional investment, it's not as if Beethoven will shoot to the top of the charts.

"We're investing in ourselves," reflects Gindele.

This is how classical musicians make their mark.

Both of them had transformative experiences when they were young, finding themselves in record stores in their midteens listening to pivotal quartets by ensembles that planted the seed of a career early on simply through the intensity or power of captured wavelengths.

No wonder the experience of recording is all in their heads.

"I've known (this Beethoven quartet) since I was 12. And now I'm going to lay it down forever," Fedkenheuer says.

After 80 hours of work over 11 days, the Miró's reward is a mere hour and 40 minutes of some of the most beautiful and stirring music ever written.

A difficult business indeed.

This summer the Miró will perform around the country, including Tuesday at New York's Avery Fisher Hall, alongside Yo-Yo Ma and the New York Philharmonic.

But if you can't hear the Miró play the Razumovksy quartets in person, they'll be encoded forever — just another album on your shelf.