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String quartets and colleges - a musical marriage



Courtesy Of The Miro Quartet

The Miro Quartet will be presented by Houston Friends of Chamber Music on Sept. 17, 2013.

By Colin Eatock

September 15, 2013

Every university requires some basic things: libraries, lecture halls, laboratories - and winning sports teams are an asset, too.

But what does a university need with a string quartet? On the surface, it doesn't seem like a campus necessity. Yet just about every established professional string quartet in America has some kind of affiliation with a university.

The Takács Quartet is based at the University of Colorado, the Emersons are at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the St. Lawrences are at Stanford University - the list goes on.

The four members of the Miró Quartet - performing for Houston Friends of Chamber Music on Tuesday - know all about life in a college-based string quartet. This year they celebrate their 10th season in residence at the University of Texas at Austin.

At the school, the Mirós combine their teaching responsibilities with a busy touring schedule that takes them out of town for about 80 engagements throughout the year. Some concerts, such as Tuesday's, aren't far from home. But tours to Europe and Asia can last several weeks.

"We've been treated very well by the University of Texas," says Joshua Gindele, the ensemble's cellist. "Our teaching load is half a normal professor's load - but we provide service in other ways, like playing concerts, fundraising and doing things for donors."

It's a mutually beneficial relationship. A fine string quartet enhances the prestige of a university. And quartets with jobs at universities are in an enviable position. Unlike orchestras and opera companies, which must be self-supporting - and which often struggle to stay afloat these days - string quartets enjoy the stability of a parent institution with deep pockets.



Yet Gindele says, the relationship between string quartets and universities goes beyond practical advantages. In his opinion, the string quartet can be viewed as a metaphor for what universities are all about.

"Quartets have a way of working that is non-hierarchical," he points out, "yet there's a lot of communication and relationship building. There's a malleability and a give-and-take of power and energy. It's something that professors and administrators see as a valuable learning tool - the ability to work cooperatively with others, to put your ego aside for the betterment of the group."



Courtesy Of The Miro Quartet

The Miró Quartet has spent 10 years as artists in residence at the University of Texas at Austin.

Gindele also argues that quartet players bring a special approach to music instruction.

"Some of the best music teachers have come out of string quartets," he states. "Quartet playing makes people delve deeply into their music - it's a good way to teach the subtleties and intimacies of music-making. When you hear great orchestras like the Cleveland Orchestra or the Berlin Philharmonic, what they're doing is playing chamber music on a larger scale."

On top of teaching and playing, the Miró Quartet is also involved in scientific research. Collaborating with Dr. Evan Collins, an orthopedic surgeon at Houston Methodist Hospital, they participate in the work of the hospital's Center for Performing Arts Medicine.

"We do some lecturing with Evan," Gindele explains. "We talk about the different kinds of strains and stresses that affect musicians. This is something that hasn't been done as much as it should be done for musicians. Among my students, I see a lot of physical problems that can lead to devastating injuries later on."

If a marriage between universities and string quartets isn't an obvious pairing, it turns out to be a surprisingly rich and useful union. Without the support of colleges, it's hard to imagine how American quartets could thrive in the international world of classical music.

It's a professional life that demands flexibility - combining teaching duties with hard-nosed business acumen.

Says Gindele: "We have to be entrepreneurial because we have to go out and get concerts, and work with managers and record companies."

At Tuesday's concert, which opens Houston Friends of Chamber Music's 2013-14 season, the Miró Quartet will play string quartets by Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert and contemporary American composer Philip Glass.

Colin Eatock is a composer who covers music. He lives in Toronto.

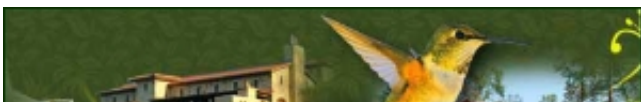
Miró Quartet

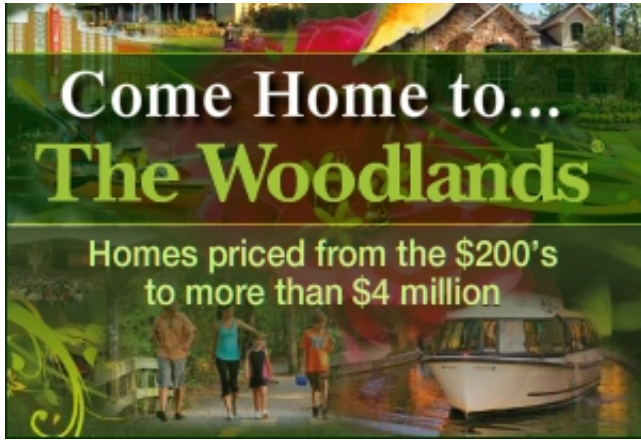
Presented by Houston Friends of Chamber Music

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Stude Concert Hall, Rice University, entrances 8 or 18

Tickets: \$20-\$75; 713-348-5400, houstonfriendsofchambermusic.org/





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