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Classical Music

## A bold force in foursomes

*The members of Ethel offer a different string-quartet sound, and not just because of their penchant for improvising, amplifying, commissioning and composing.*

February 20, 2005 | Kyle Gann | Special to The Times

NEW YORK — By now it's clear that even if most of the classical music world will have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century, that's not true of the string quartet. The orchestra may look like a counterexample to Darwin, but string quartets evolve. Already we've had string quartets with drummers, string quartets who play jazz, even quartets with weird outfits and spiky haircuts. And now we have Ethel, who will make their Los Angeles debut Saturday at the Southern California Institute of Architecture as part of Chamber Music in Historic Sites.

Yes, Ethel is the quartet's name (we'll get into that later), and don't dare call them "the Ethel String Quartet." They're just Ethel, and they represent perhaps the most radical redefinition of the medium yet. It's not just that they play all new repertoire. It's not just that they usually play with amplification, though that's true too. It's not just that they improvise. Other quartets have done these things before.

What's most subversive about Ethel is that they're breaking down the traditional lines between composer and performer and between performer and technology.

The group consists of violinists Todd Reynolds and Mary Rowell, violist Ralph Farris and cellist Dorothy Lawson. None of them started out as composers, but they all compose now, and they compose for the quartet. When they're not playing their own music, they're generally playing music they commissioned, by composers they know, and most of what they play allows for some degree of improvisation. They've played several pieces that involve electronics, and they use microphones and loudspeakers not just for reasons of acoustic convenience but as integral to the collective sound they want to make.

Also, as Reynolds says from his home in New York, "the amplification allows us appropriateness in any venue. There's no place we can't play. You learn what's possible by watching rock 'n' roll groups over the last 15 years. You'd have to be a fool not to make yourself able to address any possible audience if that's what you want."

What all this adds up to is a different string-quartet sound. The players are more part of the music, and their playing isn't glued to the page: If a passage suggests bluegrass or folk fiddling or electric-guitar pitch-bending, they feel free to swing with it. And their use of amplification takes them outside the polite, carefully balanced sound world of traditional chamber music. They own their music, and when they want it to roar, they roar.

An earlier trailblazer

From its origins in the 1750s until 1973, the string quartet was a pretty sedate medium, a symbol of elegance and gentility. But in '73, San Francisco's Kronos Quartet started commissioning new works and turning the quartet from a porcelain museum into an electrified generator of new sounds and a fuser of intercontinental influences. For every quartet since that has wanted to make an unusual mark, the Kronos set the standard.

"The Kronos question comes up a lot," Reynolds acknowledges. "They were our 30-year-old model." But to distinguish themselves, he says, the members of Ethel "made a choice not to play music they had played before."

Says cellist Lawson, "We admire the heck out of them and enjoy them, but we didn't design ourselves in relation to them. We were following a trajectory and opportunities that were original. We express a different creative aesthetic: lighter, looser, less process-oriented."

"And more improvised," adds Reynolds. (The Ethel performers have one thing in common with a classical quartet: They talk in fluid counterpoint.)

Post-Kronos, unconventional string quartets sprang up in the 1980s in other cities. In New York, the Soldier String Quartet started mixing blues into avant-garde string playing, often adding a drummer. The Turtle Island quartet arose in the Midwest as an improvising ensemble. The Sirius quartet broke off from the Soldier to focus on New York's downtown jazz scene.

Ethel's origins, however, were quite separate. To someone who covers the New York scene, as I have for 18 years, Reynolds and his violin colleague Rowell have long seemed omnipresent. For 15 years, Reynolds has played with the Bang on a Can festival, which has introduced new concepts of chamber music, often located somewhere between classical and pop. Meanwhile, Rowell played in the Sirius quartet and in nearly every other group that needed an avant-garde, do-anything violinist.

Lawson was more "straight-ahead classical," having played with the Orpheus, American Symphony and New York Philharmonic orchestras. And Farris, the violist, was a studio musician with loads of contacts in the rock world.

By 1998, Reynolds recalls, "I had decided that it was time for me to start a band of my own" -- and that's what the Ethel players consistently call themselves, a band. "It seemed to be one of my personal next steps."

Coincidentally, entrepreneur and new-music baritone Tom Buckner "asked me to form a group to record something by Mel Graves." In a further coincidence, composer and new-music curator John King "had asked Mary to put together a band to play his string music."

"The incredible thing," Lawson says, "is that both Todd and Mary thought of the same group."

What's more, having played together only once, the four immediately started looking around for composers. Reynolds, who had just started writing music himself, contacted Phil Kline, a New York composer known for writing big electronic symphonies for multiple boomboxes. Reynolds also requested music from Marcelo Zarvos, the Brazilian film composer of the scores for "The Door in the Floor" and "Kissing Jessica Stein."

"We're not as much about commissioning," says Reynolds, "as about finding very particular types of people to get involved with commissioning -- looking for people coming out of the woodwork who might not have thought about fitting into the classical tradition or writing a string quartet before."

For Ethel's eponymous first CD, released on Bang on a Can's Cantaloupe label, they chose "Sweet Hardwood" by King -- the piece that had brought them all together -- along with Kline's "The Blue Room and Other Stories"; "Be-In," by frequent Bang on a Can composer Evan Ziporyn; and Reynolds' own "Uh ... It All Happened So Fast."

"About 70% of what we do is works commissioned from other people," Reynolds estimates, "20% music from inside the band and 10% stuff that was written for other quartets."

Yet even among avant-garde chamber groups, Ethel is unusual for the extent to which repertoire is only one aspect of their programming. They sometimes improvise between works, making a smooth transition from one to another, and they are willing to shift course in midconcert depending on audience feedback. As Lawson puts it, "We like to establish a journey, a road map, for each concert, a compatible variety of things. The pieces relate to each other depending on how we order them. You never get the same audience twice, and you find a different purpose for moving to each piece in each case."

Reynolds elaborates: "We usually walk in with a program, but we usually alter it. Luckily, presenters haven't gotten too upset yet." At SCI-Arc, the group plans to play some Reynolds pieces, Kline's engagingly post-Minimalist "Blue Room," Rowell's bluesy arrangement of a Lennie Tristano piece, a new piece written for them by Victoria Bond based on music by Ray Charles, and some music from a Finnish fiddle band arranged by Farris. But don't hold them to any of it.

For Reynolds, Saturday's performance will represent a homecoming of sorts. He grew up in Los Angeles, where his father was the organist for Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Gospel Church and taught music at Leuzinger High School.

Having started violin at age 4 in USC's Suzuki preparatory program, the young Reynolds played in the American Youth Symphony and, from age 18 to 20, studied in Jascha Heifetz's master class. His parents now live in Palm Springs.

"I was doing a lot of studio work out there," he says of L.A., "and I left a whole potential career there to come to New York for my education. I was an only child, and it was important for me to get out and see a different part of the world. I went to Eastman [School of Music in Rochester, N.Y.] and became principal second violinist of the Rochester Orchestra."

But, he says, "I needed to find a compositional and improvisational voice, and I knew it wouldn't happen there, so I moved to New York City."

What they answer to

Oh, yes, and the group's name? It turns out they gave their debut performance in New York under the more predictably punk moniker Hazardous Materials. But as Reynolds recounts it, "As we reinvented ourselves after that first year, when we really threw all our cards on the table, we decided to look for a name that represented our feelings and commitments.

"It's terrible trying to find a name for a group. You start writing down stuff and nothing looks good, and it's horrible. Eventually, I remember saying, 'You ought to be able to name an entity the way you name a child.' Then Mary walked in, and she had just seen 'Shakespeare in Love,' in which 'Romeo and Juliet' was originally named 'Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter.'"

When I volunteer that I had an Aunt Ethel, Reynolds is jubilant.

"Everyone has an aunt named Ethel. It's such a dowdy, pre-'60s name, with no pretension. It's never worked against us. The name has always been supportive."

\*

Ethel

Where: Southern California Institute of Architecture, 960 E. 3rd St., L.A.

When: 3 p.m. Saturday

Price: \$35 and \$38

Contact: (213) 477-2929 or [www.dacamera.org](http://www.dacamera.org)

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