



# OPUS

by Michael Hollinger  
Directed by Brendon Fox

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**THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS**

**2013-2014 SEASON**

FROM THE INSIDE OUT

A *Violist's  
Perspective*



JOANNA MENDOZA, *violist of  
the acclaimed Arianna String Quartet,*  
*sheds light on the realities  
of life in a string quartet.*

A number of years ago NPR ran a special, "This Is What I Live For," which broached the idea of dream jobs. The host dreamed of playing cello in the celebrated Guarneri String Quartet. David Soyer, the cellist in the Guarneri Quartet for nearly 40 years, wryly said that he'd "rather be a tugboat captain (just not on choppy water)." Clearly, even among those at the top of their profession, the grass can appear greener in another field. However, I can attest that although, as in every profession, life in a string quartet has its share of stress and frustration, ultimately, it's a fulfilling one—sometimes even living up to its dream-job status. As the violist for the Arianna String Quartet, I hope to shed a little light on the quartet life and why string quartets are reportedly among the happiest of any profession.

#### OFFSTAGE

*Opus* is a dramatic view of one quartet and its complex relationships. Are the dynamics similar within all quartets—so dramatic and full of turmoil? With four strong personalities and opinions, conflict is inevitable. To say we know each other's weaknesses would be an understatement. It takes a great deal of trust and respect to work together successfully. Being a quartet musician often feels like being in a three-way marriage—without the benefits.

A quartet is a long-term relationship. (The Arianna String Quartet formed in 1992.) We work closely and intensely, spending hours together nearly every day and sometimes seeing each other more than our families for weeks on end. It's not a life for the thin-skinned, insecure or faint of heart. The constant scrutiny of one's playing, the criticism, and the need to handle potentially difficult personalities—especially one's own—are enough to dissuade many classical musicians from quartet life.

In the end, though, the music and our working toward something greater than ourselves keep us together. Our relationship is a vital part of our music, and our respect and admiration for each other contribute to our success. The quartet is in many ways our second family, and, thankfully, we enjoy

many hours of laughter, banter and private jokes. For a quartet to last long, there's no other way.

#### FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

We are storytellers. We are the actors in a play, the directors, and the costume and set designers. We interpret, but we also create, bringing to life the drama written on the page and hidden between the lines. While there are notes that the composer wrote and that we must play, what distinguishes us is how we play them. As characters in a story, we respond to one another and to the physical (and musical) environment. The human, spontaneous element is what makes the music come alive. Our timing, delivery and interplay, and our energy together with that of the audience, all affect the performance from one night to the next. So every time we perform, we're creating something new. Just like the actors here tonight.

#### BEHIND THE SCENES

Is playing in a string quartet a real job—getting together for a few hours every day to rehearse and talk about Beethoven or Schubert, traveling and dressing up to play concerts? In fact, it is an amazing privilege to live a life in such a way, immersed in this

great music. However, the quartet is also a business, each of us a partner in it, with the stress and responsibility of managing it.

The Arianna Quartet is the resident string quartet and full-time string faculty at the University of Missouri—St. Louis. For the professional quartet, teaching and performing create an ideal balance, as one informs and enhances the other. This teaching position allows us to choose which concerts to accept, what repertoire to program, and what projects to pursue. These concerts require immeasurable planning and preparation. In addition, performing itself is an athletic and physically demanding endeavor that requires intense focus and concentration.

The quartet provides us with opportunities to travel both within and outside the country to perform and to teach. We enjoy this part of our career, yet are mindful of the time that it takes us away from our families and responsibilities closer to home. When we're in town, we rehearse three hours a day, five days a week. In addition, we must find time for our own, individual practicing. We teach every day, set aside time for managing the business, look for time to reach out to the community, local schools and young musicians, and, always, hope for more time with our other families.

## WHY ARE STRING QUARTETS SO HAPPY?

Research has continued to show the highest level of fulfillment and job satisfaction in string quartets—not only among musicians, but across a wide spectrum of professions. As I see it, there are three reasons:

**1. Repertoire** The repertoire for quartets is an embarrassment of riches that continues to grow. Like great works of

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literature and plays, these compositions are masterpieces, the pinnacle of composers' achievements.

Because string quartet music is, by definition, for four voices, one person on each part, it is a distilled medium. Composers find this restriction very challenging. One cannot hide in a string quartet—neither the composer, nor the players. Yet, in spite of it, composers have found so much possibility in the genre and what the quartet can be in terms of sound, that works for quartets are

often the gems of composers' repertoire. They often consider their quartets to be their most challenging test of skill and their crown of artistic achievement.

**2. Creative Freedom** Each of us is vital to the artistic vision of the quartet.

Each of us has played in professional orchestras. In fact, our first violinist, John McGrosso, was a member of the Saint Louis Symphony for seven years under Leonard Slatkin. Playing in a quartet and in a symphony are equally demanding but for entirely different reasons. In an orchestra, one must learn an enormous amount of music very quickly, the focus on technically mastering the notes to play them according to the musical decisions of the conductor. The goal for the string players in the orchestra is to create one collective, cohesive sound with the ten or twelve other people in the same section playing the same part.

In a string quartet, we are conductors and every section of the orchestra, and together we make all the musical decisions. Each of us is a soloist, weaving in and out of leading and following. We enjoy that creative freedom, the artistic autonomy. Each of us has a crucial voice that needs to be as strong on its own as it is flexible in collaboration.

Listeners often assume that playing first violin or cello must be the most satisfying in the quartet. Our ears are first attracted to the highest and lowest voices. There's a special lure, however, to the inner voices, the second violin and viola. We are often steering from the middle of the group, controlling the ebb and flow of the rhythm and pacing, and providing the tension and release in the harmony. We are the glue. We are the moral of the story, the heartbreak and the hope.

There is a famous analogy between a string quartet and a bottle of wine: the cello is the bottle, the first violin, the label. But the inner voices are the wine.

**3. Process** We are gluttons for punishment. We criticize, argue and solve problems. We balance, tune and decide how to move the music. We toss around ideas and inspire one another.

We start with the assumption that the composer wrote every note on the page for a reason. So, everything must be played with intention. And that intention is what we rehearse. What ideas or themes do we want to feature, how do the supporting elements (harmony, rhythm) affect the story? We experiment with different colors of sound, vibrato, articulation and tempo to create character and emotion and bring the drama to life.

Our ideas and decisions are informed by language, history, music theory and physics. We discuss inflection, rhetoric, phrase lengths and destination.

Especially important are the decisions that we make that allow for ultimate flexibility and spontaneity in performance. Surprisingly, to do that, we plan and organize. Decisions of balance, shape, pacing and direction—all of these decisions in rehearsal enable us to respond quickly in performance.

Our work is about imagination and collaboration. We delve into some of the greatest literature ever written and together give life to these stories. It's a drama worth all of its challenges.



*Based in St. Louis since 2000, the Arianna String Quartet has performed to critical acclaim throughout the US and abroad. Their performances have been described in recent reviews as "truly transcendent" (Fanfare Magazine), with "emotional commitment and fluent virtuosity," (Pretoria News, South Africa). They can be heard on National Public Radio's "Performance Today," and "Live from Music Mountain," which broadcasts to 125 stations in the US and to 35 countries.*

*In addition to their faculty position at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, the Arianna Quartet presents an annual series of concerts at the Touhill Performing Arts Center and a new series at Grand Center, "First Mondays with the ASQ." [www.ariannaquartet.com](http://www.ariannaquartet.com)*