

# Meet Me at the UCA

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THE ARTS  
SPRING 2009 PERFORMANCES AND EXHIBITIONS



## Amani String Quartet CSU's Graduate String Quartet - FREE Concert

Thursday, April 30, 3:00 p.m.  
Organ Recital Hall, University Center for the Arts  
1400 Remington St., Fort Collins, Colorado

Enjoy an afternoon of best-loved quartet repertoire including Haydn's *String Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2*, Smetana's *String Quartet No. 1 in E Minor "From My Life"*, and Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet, Op. 5*. CSU Graduate String Quartet Program made possible by a donation from ART342.org.

### A Feature Story About the Quartet

Eleven minutes and ten seconds, exactly. Not a second later, the Amani String Quartet finishes the surreal sounds and special effects of Anton Webern's *Five Pieces for String Quartet, Op. 5*.

The graduate students sustain their final notes in the contemporary work, extending the atonal voice in a decrescendo until all is silent. Suddenly, all sensitivities to noise are realized: the dull murmur of the practice room. The soft buzz of the lights. A pen scratching on a clipboard.

Meanwhile, to the west, the foothills of the great Rocky Mountains look on through a window view. It is a calm, clear and bright spring afternoon as Colorado State University's resident graduate string quartet sits in perfect stillness, ushering not a sound.

The quartet holds the "rest" another four seconds. Time ticks away to a tempo of 60 beats per minute. Then, after the fifth beat of silence, violinist Wyatt True makes his entrance.

"All right," he says to the quartet. "Good."

Suddenly, two more voices enter the conversation. Kaleigh McCool, violinist, follows Wyatt's lead, and Cynthia Drexler, violist, chimes in thereafter. Automatically, the three discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the five movements freshly performed. Sometimes their statements overlap; sometimes one sentence is more pronounced. Every sentence takes a sound; every phrase takes a shape. The third movement had tight spots, yet the first movement had fortitude, they say in summary.

Finally, the three voices taper off as Lisa Espinosa, cellist, speaks her solo.

"That last part, I looked up to see what Wyatt was doing," she says, a flower-patterned silk draped over her hair like a bandana. "And then I look back two bars ahead of where I was supposed to be!"

She laughs. The quartet – four players, sixteen strings, one entity – keeps discussing the music. They speak passionately, cohesively, together.

## **The Four-Way Conversation**

The archetypal quartet is compared to “the litmus test for all musical groups – both for composers, and for musicians themselves,” says Lisa. Chamber players recognize the tall order of the string quartet, as the lexicon predates the 19th century.

Good quartet players are not only technically proficient, and they not only make music come off a page. Individuals in a quartet must work well together, react to one another, and be sensitive to the sounds of every note.

“It’s often described as a four-way conversation,” Lisa says. “It’s very intimate... It’s definitely a lot like talking and having an intimate conversation with a friend, except musically.”

In the musical conversation, players listen just as well as they communicate. They are able to pick up on one another’s cues, play on time together, blend together and react to changes in the music.

At the same time, Lisa notes, “the quartet needs to sound like one entity, not four separate players playing one piece.”

Ideally, Kaleigh adds, the quartet “should like one person playing a 16-string instrument,” to borrow a quote from a former instructor.

Sharing responsibilities in a small ensemble leads to pressures and high stakes in the very exposed quartet. However, this is also a source of great joy for chamber players.

As opposed to playing in an orchestra, quartet players are able to exercise more artistic liberty and contribute their own musical ideas to the group.

“Having that personal freedom of musical expression in a string quartet is really one of the things that draws us to that form,” says Margaret Miller, the director of the string quartet program and the Assistant Professor of Viola and Chamber Music.

To completely debug the mystique and allure of the quartet, Cynthia sums it up: “There’s just nothing like playing chamber music.”

## **The Four Players**

The Amani String Quartet has been Colorado State University’s resident graduate string quartet since 2008. Under the direction of Margaret Miller, the quartet performs and instructs throughout northern Colorado and holds frequent recitals, masterclasses, and outreach programs at local high schools for student orchestras and chamber groups.

The quartet is comprised of three students mastering in performance and one student, Cynthia Drexler, in music therapy. Prior to the first rehearsals together in August 2008, the quartet players had never met one another.

Denver native Kaleigh McCool, violin, traveled the shortest distance to study in the quartet program. Hailing from central Pennsylvania, Wyatt True, violin, had applied exclusively to Colorado programs out of his passion for rock climbing. Lisa Espinosa, cello, from Miami, turned down acceptance to a graduate psychology program in California. She has a sister, Sara, who attends the School of the Arts as a freshman music student.

Cynthia Drexler, violist, also has family at the university: her daughter, Aria, is a freshman working toward a nutrition major and a music minor. Cynthia had been teaching and playing professionally in the San Diego area before seeking the music therapy degree.

“It was a total shock,” Cynthia said of adjusting to “being around young people again, and the energy that they have.” While she enjoys the “totally different” process, it does pose such challenges as adapting to new technologies that weren’t in use in the ‘80s, when Cynthia was first in college.

All four players share the inextricable love of music, specifically the love of the quartet. Professional aspirations within the group include quartet playing, orchestra playing, private lessons, coachings, freelance, teaching and music therapy.

Regardless of vocation, Wyatt says, the quartet players will keep a lifelong bond to music in one form or another.

“I don’t think we know the extent to which music will play in our lives,” Wyatt says. “But we’ll always do something with music, for sure.”

Margaret Miller coordinates the quartet program and coaches the group for one-and-a-half to two hours a week. The quartet rehearses four days and eight hours a week on average.

“There’s a tremendous balancing act that they need to do, because they also have their coursework,” Miller says. “It’s a lot of work, but it’s also really good preparation for the kind of music life that they might have.”

In addition to rehearsing for the quartet and maintaining individual practice, the players also attend classes; rehearse with the orchestra; prepare for master’s recitals; and grade for Music Appreciation, MU 100.

Miller notes the valuable experience the players gain from multiple commitments. Upon graduation, the players could be teaching and playing in an orchestra professionally while still playing in a quartet.

## **The Projects**

Amani looks to a summer of labor of love, combining international travel, intensive rehearsing, and exciting opportunities. These fresh experiences will enable the quartet’s continued growth – musically, professionally and interpersonally – as the players head toward the second year of camaraderie.

First off, the quartet wraps up the semester with a final recital for the department. The free concert is on Thursday, April 30, at 3:00 p.m. in the Organ Recital Hall at the University Center for the Arts. Featuring music from a variety of musical eras, the program includes quartets by Haydn, Smetana and Webern.

The quartet’s impressive summer lineup includes two out-of-state chamber music study programs.

The destinations are (1) the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Chamber Music Institute, in June, for a weeklong intensive; and (2) the Orvieto Musica in Orvieto, Italy, for a three-week international chamber music intensive spanning June through July.

Each intensive’s distinctly different aims will help the quartet work toward different strategic goals, says Lisa Espinosa.

“That’s what the quartet program is for: It’s about teaching us how to become a quartet in every possible way,” she says.

The quartet’s full fellowship to attend the Chamber Music Institute will allow a specialized focus on the business-related aspects of the quartet. The program, outlining lessons in performance, composition and entrepreneurship, will advise the quartet on management, intellectual property, project funding and business structuring.

Curriculum at the Chamber Music Institute includes daily coachings and masterclasses from the Chiara String Quartet, Artists-in-Residence, as well as business consults from the Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship in the UNL College of Business Administration.

Amani was also invited to Orvieto Musica in Italy, an intensive three-week program limited to eight string players and five brass players, total. This unique festival combines musicianship with rich, cultural immersion in the 12th-century Italian hill town of Orvieto and surrounding areas.

Along with daily coachings and masterclasses, the program features tours; public performances at historical buildings; an annual Orvieto Classico wine tasting; and optional Italian language and culture classes. The quartet will give concerts at such venues as the Museo Greco, the Ridotto of the Teatro Mancinelli, and Sala Expo.

Associate Professor Dr. Todd Queen, Voice faculty and Director of Opera, had previously participated in Orvieto Musica in 2008 with another CSU student. Impressed by the program, Dr. Queen informed the quartet when Nyela Basney, director and founder of Orvieto Musica, came to Fort Collins in March.

Once Dr. Queen set up an audition for Amani, the quartet was invited to the program soon thereafter.

Members of the Amani String Quartet are no strangers to international travel, as players have already perused France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Poland, Israel, Portugal and Spain. However, the players say they look forward to meeting Italy’s landscapes, buildings and culture.

At least one quartet member says she will opt for the Italian language lessons.

“I’m taking it for sure,” laughs Lisa, who already speaks conversational French and Spanish. The players smile as she does, meeting her words with a ripple of laughter.

The Amani String Quartet is accepting sponsorship for the trip to Italy. For more information, please contact Jennifer Clary at 970-491-3603. To learn more about the Chamber Music Institute, visit <http://www1.unl.edu/music/CMI/>. To learn more about the Orvieto Musica, visit <http://www.orvietomusica.org/>. The Amani String Quartet can be reached at <http://www.amaniquartet.com>.