

MANDELRING QUARTET VIOLINIST NANETTE SCHMIDT AND CELLIST BERNHARD SCHMIDT FIND THAT MAKING MUSIC AS SIBLINGS LEADS TO GROUP HARMONY RATHER THAN RIVALRY

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BERNHARD SCHMIDT



NANETTE SCHMIDT



NANETTE IS A VERY WARM AND CHARMING PERSON WHO

reacts emotionally more often than I do. But when it comes to music, we share common aims: principally, that we have to say something both as a quartet and as individuals within it. We rarely listen to other recordings and our goal is to find a natural interpretation, a personal connection to the piece that we can share with our audience, to make them feel as we do. I remember after playing the slow movement of the Brahms A minor Quartet op.51 no.2, one member of the audience said that the intensity of our performance had brought his wife to tears. It's important to reach people in this way.

The scores are only a small part of a piece of music and the interesting part of the process is what happens emotionally in a piece – uncovering the ninety-five per cent behind the five per cent of music that you see on the page. Nanette and I don't really have musical arguments, but then our tastes are similar. Choosing new works for the quartet is very easy, and if it happens that either of us is not interested in playing a piece, the repertoire is so huge that we can easily agree to move on to something else. It would be more difficult if we could only choose from the more limited repertoire of a string trio.

Nanette and I have travelled with the quartet to some interesting countries. We toured north Vietnam in 1990: we were one of the first groups to play there after the fall of the 'iron curtain'. Wherever we played people kept offering us bananas because they thought we were from East Germany, where bananas were hard to come by. I also remember a rehearsal we had with a pianist in a hall in Hanoi. We noticed that the piano didn't work properly, and on opening the lid we found a dead cockroach blocking several keys. We were later told that the piano had been buried outside the city during the Vietnam War in order to protect it.

It's very difficult when you're so close to someone over such a long period of time to say how your relationship has developed. Nanette, Sebastian [our elder brother and the other Mandelring violinist] and the violist Roland Glassl all live in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, and I live nearby, just 15 minutes away in a small, wine-growing village near Landau. So we're together virtually every day, even when we're not on tour. One change over time has been that Nanette and I have become much more relaxed with each other – and this extends to the way in which the quartet operates: we don't feel in a rush to find solutions to musical problems. We have experienced the way in which things happen spontaneously on stage, and spontaneity is what we believe in.

I STARTED PLAYING CHAMBER MUSIC WITH MY OLDER BROTHERS

Sebastian and Bernhard from quite an early age, forming a string quartet with them at school when I was eleven. It was after playing together at various events – such as weddings – that I began to realise how much fun I was having and that I wanted to pursue it professionally. Although Sebastian and I were somewhat competitive, there was no competition between Bernhard and me. But it was only really at the age of 25 that I no longer felt like the 'little sister'.

My role in the quartet is to keep the mood positive. I always feel that when I'm in a bad mood during a rehearsal, the rehearsal is also bad. Bernhard deals with all the administrative matters. He's very organised and the quartet would not work without him, not only because we'd miss the cello but also because he does so many things for us. Bernhard's also well balanced and easy to deal with, a good-tempered person who loves to work through a piece of music. He has taught me discipline, initially teaching me to work at the violin every day.

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I'd say we have been tested over the years, not least when an octogenarian factory chairman in Karlsruhe asked us if he could lead the quartet during our recital for him – he loved music and wanted to experience playing in a quartet. Sebastian stepped aside and the chairman joined us to perform the slow movement of an early Mozart quartet. Watching the audience – all his employees – was hilarious because he was so nervous that he couldn't stop trembling and played completely out of synch with the rest of the quartet.

Being related does have a big impact on the quartet because we can rely absolutely upon each other. Even early on, we were able to close our eyes and start a piece together, just breathe and then play together in a homogeneous way. I recall playing our first big tour, visiting Israel during our late teens. As we played the last 40 bars of the last movement of Beethoven's op.18 no.4 quartet, our kibbutz was suddenly plunged into darkness by a power cut. We continued to play in the dark until the final few bars when the lights came back on. It can take years for others to achieve this understanding. We also know that we'll stick together: no one's just going to say, 'I'm doing something different now – goodbye.'

Interviews by Nick Shave