

**Interview with members of the Belcea Quartet:  
Laura Samuel, violin and Krzysztof Chorzelski, viola  
October 24, 2009  
www.ChamberMusicConcerts.org  
By Alice Hardesty**

Alice Hardesty (AH): I finally figured out how to pronounce the name of your quartet, Belcea (*BEL-chah*) but how did you get your name? I know that your first violinist is Corina Belcea-Fisher, but how did you decide?

Laura Samuel (LS): It wasn't really a conscious decision, but we were students and were entering a competition, so we had to have a name. It was an early stage for the quartet and we felt slightly embarrassed to call ourselves the Beethoven or the Schubert, and every other name we came up with sounded incredibly pretentious. At that point we were studying with the Chilingirian Quartet and they were named after their first violinist, Levon Chilingirian, so we decided, oh let's just call ourselves the Belcea Quartet and later we can change it. But it just stuck!

Krzysztof Chorzelski (KC): And also, all the good names were gone.

AH: How did you meet?

KC: We met at the Royal College of Music. It was a very interesting time, just as the iron curtain fell and there was a lot of flexibility for musicians like Corina and me who could travel abroad and study. We actually discovered that we arrived at in the UK on the same day in 1981, just as the iron curtain fell, but we didn't meet until about 4 years later. There was a good mix of Europeans and our quartet is a good representation of that moment [English, Polish, Rumanian, and French]. Also, the college really supported us. There was an effort to integrate us and help us financially.

LS: You got the impression that the ones who were supported financially were the most talented and the ones who were going to contribute to the school and the general musical life. I think it was right at the end of real government funding for students. It's a very different story now, though. Certainly students have to pay a considerable amount.

KC: And students from my country are no longer considered in vogue. Before, there was tremendous excitement about people coming from places like Poland and Rumania. It was a mutual thing. For me it was my life. I realized that there were no limits to what I could learn and what I could see, so I never looked back.

AH: Speaking of that multi-culturalism, you're all from different countries and different cultures, I was wondering what kind of effect that has on your playing, your selection of pieces, and your affinity for certain composers?

LS: I think that those differences make us unique in our own way. Of course, you can't have a long-time working relationship with musicians that you don't have a certain

amount of common ground with. Those differences throw up a certain amount of conflict. But it's a positive conflict in that you draw from each other's experiences and that can only be a good thing. I think as far as repertoire goes, there are certain pieces that we each feel more comfortable with, and that probably has to do with our culture and experience. We played the Szymanowski quartets, for example, which Krzysztof feels particularly comfortable with, and the Enescu octet, which Corina plays absolutely wonderfully. It seems natural that we have an affinity with certain repertoire, but together we come up with an interpretation that's a combination of all those different elements.

AH: And your love of Benjamin Britten?

KC: Personally, I wouldn't come up with Britten as my composer of choice. Coming from Poland it was not music that I understood, but this has changed dramatically working together with the group. I would say that Laura has a more natural affinity with this music, but what is good about us is that we are starting to own our way of playing – our way of playing Szymanowski, Britten, and Enescu. There is no sense that we have one kind of sound, not a British sound or Polish sound. It happens that we can plug into one of our backgrounds and find something that we can all relate to. And although we have been playing French music for some time, it is only recently that we have a French member of the quartet, and when we went back to playing Ravel, we felt Antoine's presence very strongly.

LS: I think you can't underestimate the effect that everything in your background brings to your playing, your personality, it's a quality that's hard to define. Nationalistic sounds too much like bravado, but there's no question that with something from your own culture, you just immediately have a sensibility... For example, when I hear Elgar, I think that's home, my country, that's my countryside, and I can't help but bring that to the group.

KC: Yes, just to show the degree of my integration, we've been playing the Elgar Quintet, and I think it's one of the greatest piano quintets that there are – very underrated, rarely performed. Just recently we played it at a festival in Poland and of course, no one had heard of it. I wouldn't be surprised if it was the first time this quintet was performed there. I felt so proud, that this quintet was now part of my identity, and I realized just how much this Englishness has sunk in!

AH: That leads me to another question. I know that your parents died some years ago and that you came to England, your adopted country, and that you have referred to the quartet members as your "siblings." I thought that was very touching and I was wondering that if indeed these members are like you siblings, how you get along together.

KC: The reason why I referred to my colleagues as siblings is that I'm an only child. I always wanted to have brothers and sisters but I never did. So playing in this quartet has provided me with that missing part of my life. I'm happy about that.

LS: We're a rather dysfunctional family. *[Laughter]*

KC: Yes, but it could be much more dysfunctional!

AH: So when you have disagreements, how do you work them out? You know, there are some quartets that don't travel together, they rent separate cars, they have separate rooms in separate hotels.

KC: We're not there yet.

LS: In that regard, we're really lucky. We have a very enjoyable and genuine friendship, which is slightly rare, I think. Of course we have all sorts of conflicts, both musically and personally, but the overriding thing is that we want to be playing quartets, we want to do the best we possibly can, and it's wonderful privilege to be playing. It might sound corny, but we could have had a terrible rehearsal or a terrible confrontation of some sort, yet we physically have to go on stage and do the concert. So we end up playing a Beethoven quartet with three other wonderful musicians. As frustrated as we might be, it's still an incredibly privileged position to be in. Conflicts and differences will always be there, and it's how you resolve those differences that really define you as a group.

KC: We're very fortunate that we all use a language that's much more powerful than a spoken language, one that can transcend all misunderstandings. That's our highest purpose and we do realize that it's very rewarding. There's a cost, but I think it makes us happy and fulfilled as musicians.

LS: There's no doubt about it. It's incredibly hard work, but the rewards are extraordinary, to be immersed in this repertoire, with no one telling you what to play or how to play it, and that transcends all the touchy times.

AH: I remember reading the autobiography of the Guarneri Quartet by Arnold Steinhardt, and there was one member of the quartet, the violist, who really wanted to play Shostakovich, and the others didn't. He would bring it up about once a year, and the rest of them said no! And I read recently that the Guarneri, before they retired, did play Shostakovich, so they must have changed their minds. What happens when somebody brings up a piece...

KC: Shostakovich. *[Laughter]* This is very sensitive because Laura doesn't like Shostakovich.

LS: I think it's too strong to say that I don't like it but I'm not crazy about it.

AH: But you do play it. Is it because the rest of the group really wants it?

LS: Who am I to say that it's not for us to play? It's just my personal opinion that his quartets are not my favorite ones to play. It doesn't mean that it's not wonderful music.

It's important for us as a group to play all types of music and I would never say that we can't play something.

AH: So it's consensus that you're talking about really, isn't it?

KC: Yes. We know we have to take risks, especially when we're playing really modern music. And some of us are more willing to take risks than others.

LS: There are so many absolutely wonderful pieces that are written for our genre. Of course we have to play all the basic Mozarts and Haydns, and Schuberts, but in this day and age to stick solely to that repertoire can look kind of boring. But it's also our duty to push the boundaries, whether it's commissioning new works or just to present those wonderful classic pieces in a slightly different environment. I think that in lots of ways we're very traditional, based in the European tradition of quartets. And yet we can say that that it doesn't make any difference what people were doing 50 years ago! But there never will be a season where we don't want to play Schubert and Beethoven, but that it's our responsibility as a young group to do more than that.

AH: Well, it sounded to me like you just loved the Britten. Am I wrong?

LS: No no, we absolutely love it.

AH: And I consider that a contemporary piece.

KC: No, it's a classic!

LS: Well, from the audience point of view it's relatively modern, at least late Britten is. We've found that with Bartok, which may be 100 years old, but still considered modern.

AH: With respect to audiences, we try to give them a varied program and we generally try to include at least one contemporary piece in every program. I think the audience today really liked the Britten, but I call it contemporary and you call it classic! I know that audiences are something you always need to think about. I'd be curious to know what you feel is a good audience, and what's a not-so-good audience.

KC: There's a question we ask ourselves. If the audience doesn't appear to be very responsive, whose fault is it that we didn't draw them in?

LS: The programming can be an issue. Your audience appeared to be very established and trusting. If it's an audience that we play to quite a bit and have gained their trust, they're much more open to something completely new. I think that it's a promoter's responsibility to judge what will be received well. Of course we want to play what we want to play, but we have to take the promoter's guidance.

KC: If there's some repertoire that is difficult to understand without some kind of introduction, we try and present some kind of background. It's much better if people

know that they're not just expected to understand, but we can reach out to them this way.

LS: A point of reference is so important, even if there's just three minutes of explanation, it can be a totally different experience.

AH: Yes, I noticed that today when you talked about the Britten Quartet and your relationship to the Amadeus Quartet, your teachers. When you pointed out that the violin that belonged to the second violinist of the Amadeus is now Laura's, I could almost hear the audience inhale. Someone came up to me afterward and said, "Is she *really* playing that Stradivarius?" Which brings me to the subject of acoustics. I know acoustics are very important to you. Could you say a little bit about how that affects you?

KC: I must say that this hall [SOU Music Recital Hall] is very fine, with a warm sound.

AH: We think so too, actually. Warm and live. Sometimes you get one or the other.

LS: Yes, that's true. But this hall is very, very fine. Incredibly clear. Certainly amongst the four of us there's a real clarity.

KC: Also, there is silence coming from the auditorium. There are some halls which are acoustically very good, but you are constantly aware of some kind of noise.

LS: Especially when there are very lively acoustics. We're aware of this when someone fidgets or drops their program, the effect is multiplied. While resonance on the stage is a good thing, we often get a lot of resonance from the audience, which is not so great.

AH: And our hall?

KC: Very good silence. Of course there are always mishaps, but that's another story. [*Laughter, referring to the cell phone and hearing aid incidents from Saturday's matinee concert.*]

KC: Different kinds of repertoire favor different kinds of acoustics. I remember one time playing Webern's "Five Pieces," which often oscillates between quadruple pianissimo and triple and double pianissimo. It was in the Cologne Philharmonie, a gigantic hall, and the strangest thing is that we were able to make all the differences in timing and dynamics, projected in this enormous space. There are other halls where you might as well not bother playing this music, however well you would play it. It makes no sense unless there is this level of silence and penetration of sound.

LS: There are some halls that have great ambience, physically very nice, but actually the feeling in the hall isn't so great.

AH: On a different topic, I think our readers would be interested in just how you manage this kind of life. You travel so much, you're away from home so much. Is it exhausting for you? Do you miss your partners? I know Corina has a child. How do you manage all this?

LS: The ideal scenario is constantly in flux. Things are often planned two years in advance so we never know quite how we'll feel, but we're constantly trying to work out the best situation. At the moment we have periods where we work very intensely, then we have periods of time at home. For example, we'll have rehearsals in London for 10 days, then do two weeks on the road, and after this we'll be in London teaching, and this seems to be the right kind of balance for us. But all sorts of things change – children, partners, different things. In previous years we've had less intense concert work, but more spread out during the year.

AH: Didn't I see that you have 84 concerts in one year?

LS: In the past, we've had over 100 concerts in a season, but that's in a different framework, two or three concerts a week, spread out over the whole year. Now we may have five concerts in a week for two weeks or so in a chunk, then we're off for a while doing other activities, like teaching, other concerts.

AH: How about seeing your loved ones?

LS: Of course we're gone a lot, but when we're at home, we *really* are at home, and that has a lot of advantages. We have flexible time then.

AH: Do you use Skype to contact your family?

KC: Yes, my whole life is based on Skype! I'm either off-line or on-line. I don't know what we'd do without Skype.

LS: Corina speaks with her daughter on Skype. Actually, there are many jobs that will take you away from your loved ones – it's not that uncommon.

AH: I went onto your website and I notice that you have an area called "Guestbook." I enjoyed reading it and I think it's rather brave of you to do that. I imagine that people sometimes post anonymous comments that can be obnoxious.

KC: We erase those.

AH: There's one that I read that I want to ask you about: "The Belcea Quartet is the best I have heard. And at 70, I have heard a lot. Furthermore, you are fun to watch." So how do you feel about being watched? Are you conscious of how you move, individually or as a group?

LS: I think you can't overestimate the visual impact that a group has. When you go to concerts you are listening with your eyes as well as your ears. I don't think it's something we're particularly conscious of in terms of the group, but individually we all have different issues with what we do with our bodies. There are certain things that are physically an aid for the listening audience, and there are others that get in the way. It's a fine line between enhancing a musical response and disturbing it. I'm sure I cross the line occasionally myself, but personally, I feel it's OK.

AH: One thing I've noticed about you is that you have very nice communication among each other. I've seen you looking, sometimes smiling. I'm sure it's helpful to you, but it's also rather appealing to the audience. I've seen groups that just sit there and stare at the music.

LS: That's the thing about chamber music, it's based on conversation and interaction. I don't think it's anything we actively try and do, it's just natural. You want to communicate as if you were speaking to each other. I really enjoy the visual aspect when I go and hear other chamber music groups play, especially when you're hearing new repertoire for the first time, the visual aid can be just as helpful as the aural aid.

AH: One time I went to hear the St. Lawrence Quartet play and the first violinist told a joke on himself. He said that he got carried away and fell off the stage. He didn't injure himself, but he was pretty embarrassed. I guess there are degrees of this kind of thing.

KC: I don't think we've gone quite that far.

AH: Tell me about the Friends of the Belcea Quartet.

KC: It's an idea that we've started that involves teaching activities, commissioning new music, various activities. But it definitely needs development. Basically, we are reaching a stage where we are no longer a young, up-and-coming quartet, and we know that we have a pool of supporters and we'd like to channel their energy and enthusiasm to what we aim for in our playing and other activities.

LS: It's basically that we're setting up a trust to support various aspects of what we do as a quartet, like working with young musicians. It would be a subgroup of our many supporters, and we're giving them a chance to get involved in decision making. It's also a way we want to pay them back for their support so that they're more involved in many aspects of our planning. Certainly in England there seems to be a network of music lovers, many of them amateur musicians themselves, that constitute the backbone of the musical society there.

KC: Also, we're thinking about possibly setting up our own festival, our own concert series, again, very much in the planning stage.

AH: That's great. If I were in London I'd probably like to be a Friend.

KC: You don't have to be in London. You could be a Friend in Portland! It's all over the world.

AH: There is something else that I wanted to ask you about. Do you ever feel that music can be healing -- of your own life or other people's lives? That there might be people in the audience, or those who buy your CDs that feel healed by your music?

KC: It's very moving when we hear someone say that, or we've given them happiness. Really, what else could we wish for, that we have the ability to touch people? I certainly feel that during the toughest times of my life, music has lifted me up always, whether playing it or listening to it, it has the most incredible power.

LS: It's all about communication, isn't it? Even in your darkest moments. There have been so many concerts where I've been exhausted, not wanting to be there, then being completely overwhelmed by the beauty of it. I think music has the power to transform you and take you to another place. As performers we have a responsibility to project that, and during our rehearsals we try to get to the core, the purest form of what the composer wants to say.

AH: Which reminds me of my last question, and that is why did you decide to choose chamber music? You could have been a soloist or a member of an orchestra.

KC: I must say that I had a crucial moment in my life. When I was 14 I was invited to take part in a summer chamber music course in Maine. Until that moment I had never heard a note of a string quartet, piano trio, or whatever. I was always practicing my Wieniawski violin concerto or whatever, trying to be as virtuosic and heroic as possible. All of a sudden I arrived in this place where I was half the age of everyone else and I heard this unbelievable music, one of the Beethoven piano trios, and I was completely transfixed by its beauty. I thought, this is paradise! This is the way I want to spend my life. That's it. This is why I'm a musician. It was quite clear -- there was nothing that enchanted me more than chamber music -- there's something so intimate about it.

LS: Yes, and there's something about hearing things played well when you're that sort of age, it's completely intoxicating -- your hormones are going like mad anyway.

KC: And when I play chamber music I still feel like this teenager!

AH: In other words, it turns you on! You love it!

KC: Yes. I'm not saying that I would be less happy if I played in a fantastic orchestra.

AH: Is it the conversation that you were talking about earlier? The intimacy?

KC: Partly, but it's the sheer quality of the music. The repertoire for beautiful string quartets is quite large.

LS: And what's amazing is that we've played string quartets for 15 years and we've just scratched the surface. Even with piano trios there's a limit, but with quartets it's literally never ending!

AH: And what is it about the quality of the music? Can you describe it?

KC: The quartet seems to be the most perfectly balanced medium for musical composition, the balance of voices, the homogeneity of sound, it's like another world. It's not that symphonic music is of a lesser quality, but we can't rely on the coloristic effects. The composers of string quartets felt that it was the highest art form – it's so abstract, so pure. It takes time to really appreciate it because you have to do without all the orchestral effects, like timber and color. You're faced with something that is very pure and very abstract. When you really immerse yourself, you realize how perfect it is, when it is of the quality of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms.

LS: Certainly the truly great composers felt that the possibilities of sound were endless in terms of textures, sounds, dynamic range. Certainly in the Beethoven quartets we play, they range from the tiniest sounds to the most explosive, I mean it's truly shocking!

AH: You mentioned the double and triple pianissimo of the Webern pieces, and it's hard to imagine an orchestra carrying that off.

LS: It's a completely different sound world, isn't it?

AH: Yes indeed! Laura and Krzysztof, thank you so much – it's been lovely, and I hope I can be the recipient of your musical gifts again and again in the future.