

**Interview with David Ying, cello, Ying Quartet**  
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**By Alice Hardesty**

Alice Hardesty: I understand that three of the four of you are siblings, and that until fairly recently there were four Yings in the Ying Quartet. How wonderful that your parents supported you so well to see that all of this happened!

David Ying: The first thing I would say is that they were definitely not planning to have a family string quartet, not even an amateur one, for sure not a professional one. I think their aims as parents were that we would get along, that we would enjoy each other's company, that we would continue to have close relationships as adults, and that we would enjoy music. My mom started us on music lessons with the aim that we would develop a lifelong love of it. She certainly had that, and my dad as well. But I think that the original plan was more like doctors like my dad, or business people, or teachers, or something a little more stable than professional musicians. And here go their kids, one by one into music.

AH: Did you (like me many years ago) go to the Winnetka School of Music?

DY: It was then the Music Center of the North Shore, which is now called the Music Institute of Chicago. It's become bigger – they have campuses all over the city, with satellite campuses in Evanston and further north. We had our lessons there and it was great to grow up in that part of the country, lots of great music in our schools, other friends to play chamber music with, and even as high schoolers, great teachers. I can say that I appreciate my early teachers as much as any of my teachers, for sure.

AH: So were your parents really surprised when you became a cohesive group?

DY: Yes, I think so. Because when we were little the only way they could get us to play together was to offer us money. So occasionally we would entertain at people's parties. But for the most part each of us played with our own friends. The whole idea of a quartet came quite a bit later when I was in music school, and each of us decided to go to music school for our own reasons. I was the oldest and decided to go to Eastman, and eventually everyone ended up at Eastman, not necessarily to stay. For example, Phil was an economics major at the time and just wanted to brush up on his music. We started to play quartets at the point when we were all college students or even grad students. By this time we had realized that we could play string quartets, and every time we went home for Christmas and played we sounded a little better so over the years it became more pleasurable. The one thing that we didn't know was whether we could rehearse together. When you have to practice together, criticize each other, work through something, and make decisions about how it's going to be, that's a little trickier. But we decided to give it a try at the Eastman School, when Janet was a freshman and I was a grad student. We had incredible mentors there, the Cleveland Quartet, not only one of the top quartets when they were playing, but also dedicated and generous teachers, so they were fantastic role models for us.

AH: Did they teach you how to make these kinds of decisions, how to work things through?

DY: For sure. They gave us strategies of how we could come to terms with things...

AH: Without killing each other....

DY: Right, but they are still mystified that there's one side of playing quartets that they have no idea how we do because we're siblings. The relationships are a little different than they would be in any other quartet.

AH: So how would you describe that sibling nature, and of course, one of you is not a sibling any more.

DY: No, it's different now because Frank has had to become a sibling (just kidding). I think there's two sides of it. One side is that there's a built-in trust of each other, a built-in loyalty because you absolutely need that to play string quartets, or to do anything where the end product relies on everybody's contribution. You ultimately have to trust each other, whether it's in sports or whatever, you have to be loyal to your team. And that's kind of built in with families. Of course you have your rough patches, but your family is still your family, and they're the people you go to when you're in trouble, so that's a good thing and it's one reason why our quartet stayed together as long as it did. These days there are lots of membership changes in groups. Now let me tell you the bad part: The bad part is that there's baggage, like I've been Janet's older brother for as long as we can remember, and when we sit down to play quartets we try not to be little sister and older brother. We just want to be fellow musicians. So trying to turn that off is more challenging. But I would say that the good has definitely outweighed the challenges, and these are things that we overcome just like every other quartet.

AH: So, after being a group of siblings for 18 years, how does it feel to have a non-Ying as your first violinist?

DY: It was a little scary at first, especially when we didn't know who it would be. But fantastic too, because in any situation, when you get used to things the way they are and take things for granted, it can shut you down from being totally creative. Having Frank in the group has been amazing from a musical point of view because everything that we'd done before has been reconsidered, and we all sound different to each other — even the three of us who have always been in the quartet sound different to each other. So we have to pay a lot more attention and rethink pieces which we've played for years — they've suddenly become new animals. I feel sort of like we're starting over again in the best possible way.

AH: Talk about being creative. I've been doing a little research on what you've been playing lately. I now have the Dim Sum and Life Music CDs, and the one you made with

the Turtle Island Quartet. The other day in Portland, I went to a concert by the Kronos Quartet and saw an unusual lack of gray hairs in the audience. I know that you're branching out into a lot of different areas now and I wonder what you can say about what young people want out of chamber music lately.

DY: I think that what young people want is the same thing that we all want. At its core, we want music to mean something to us. When music doesn't mean anything to us we turn off. The problem with young people and chamber music is sometimes they've already decided that it doesn't mean anything to them before they've even listened. Because once they get a chance to experience it, played with passion, played with the same kind of energy as the music they're more familiar with, certainly they're going to let go of the stereotype that this music has no energy or no passion. Not 100% of them will be drawn to it. But I believe that the future of classical music is really great with groups like the Kronos, with people doing things not necessarily in the way they have been done for years, but there are groups that are now playing in different environments, like bars and clubs, or simply going into schools. I think the school concerts are super important. It's as much of a concert as any concert-hall concert. You just want the young people to come into contact with the music, hopefully played by people who feel passionate about it. They could like it immediately or just store it in their brains for the future. I think it's sometimes the trappings of classical music that scares people off. Sitting for two hours in a quiet place is not something we're all used to. That's not the world that a lot of young people experience, and that's fine. But it will live, this classical music, it will.

AH: Do you think that one way to get to them is through more edgy kinds of compositions, like some of the ones in your Life Music CD and some of your commissioned pieces? And then kind of pull them into Haydn and Dvorak?

DY: We have our little subversive way of viewing music, because there's so much music out there that I wouldn't want to give up any of it. So for those people who like Beethoven and Brahms, the Life Music is a way of kind of hooking them into enjoying

some new music. But the Life Music Project is very relevant to young people because our very first commission was about the Columbine School shootings. As soon as you tell high schoolers what this piece is about, they are riveted. They can't ignore it. So our little subversive approach is to say, Well, look, Beethoven was writing "life music," it was just a different time. He wanted to portray human emotions in just as strong a way as this piece does. So, in both ways, we hope that it will create curious listeners — people who don't think they like new music and people who don't think they like older music.

AH: I've noticed with our audience that years ago Shostakovich was considered edgy and adventurous, and now Shostakovich is just like one of the boys, standard fare. I feel like our audience has really grown in the last 10 years, which I find quite gratifying.

DY: And the world has grown too. The amount of music and the kinds of music that is being written today is just mind-boggling. It's not that many years since Shostakovich was alive, but it does seem in the rear-view mirror now.

AH: Or at least standard.

DY: Now rear-view mirror is not bad. Actually, I like looking in the rear-view mirror at some of our greatest stuff. And time is the filter through which we'll know which of today's music will be remembered, too. Because not everything that was written in the classical period is remembered today.

AH: I was very interested to read about your collaboration with Turtle Island, how that started and how it went. Did you find out that you had to do things kind of differently to play with them? Not just because you were an octet.

DY: It was a great experience. It came out of friendship. Phil in our quartet was friends with David in their quartet, and they just thought it would be fun to do something together. Also, the organization Chamber Music America was trying to figure out what the "definition" of chamber music was.

AH: I remember, it was a period of angst, wasn't it?

DY: Some people were saying it could only be this or only be that. When Phil and David were talking to each other they concluded that, Ya know, it's what we all do! And we thought, what better way to figure out what chamber music was than just to play together and see what would happen. So even though they play in a considerably different style than what we were used to, and same for them playing with us, we decided to see if it were possible.

AH: So was part of it improvisation when you were playing with them?

DY: For the most part they wrote out our parts, but there were moments of improvisation. Perhaps improvisation is what scares classical musicians the most, but we found that actually the rhythmic feel of the music was much more difficult than improvisation, and we had to work quite hard together to find a way that we could all play comfortably together. It didn't happen just like that. But it was a great experience. That's what I hope happens every day in my musical life — it's the same discovery that happened when I was a freshman in high school playing the Saint Saëns cello concerto for the first time. It was something very new — I was trying to accomplish something I had never done before. That's the fantastic thing about being an artist and a musician, hopefully a metaphor about the way we could live life, or I would hope to live life. That was a great experience of something that was a bit challenging, but we wound up learning something that we had never known before, as well as establishing common ground with some musicians that we didn't know that we could do that with, and in an ultimately successful way — not just, Okay, let's put these two weird things together and see if it happens. It's the same thing that happened with the Dim Sum Project, trying to work with traditional Chinese music in a way that would somehow mesh with the Western string quartet.

AH: Were you arranging some of that?

DY: No. In some cases we asked composers to write for the project — all Chinese-American composers that were writing with this particular point of view, trying to fuse traditional Chinese music and string quartets.

AH: I can see that it would be challenging. Different rhythms... For example, the Tan Dun pieces were really interesting.

DY: Yes, different sounds. Again, by learning this new stuff, you put yourself in a position where you have to extend yourself. It's interesting that when you go back to playing Beethoven, that becomes more alive because you're more aware of what makes Beethoven, Beethoven when you've been playing jazz, or popular music, or traditional Chinese music. The things you took for granted you notice much more. It's like going on a trip and coming back home. You think, Oh, I really appreciate home!

AH: I noticed at one point that one of you said that you felt that the string quartet was an ideal vehicle for some of this new music, like your rags, which are charming.

DY: We've got some new ones that are just amazing. I just got the music for them. Well, being a string instrument player I'm a little partial, but I think that string instruments have shown themselves to be incredibly durable. Of all the instruments, they've been the least changed from when they were invented 300 years ago, and I think that's because they're so malleable. You can make so many sounds on them. So no one felt like they even needed to change them because the range of sounds was inexhaustible. I think that's also evident in the way that bowed string instruments are found in so many types of music all around the world — blue grass, folk music, rock bands, various kinds of world music. Then you put four of them together and you've got the possibility of doing multiple activities at the same time, with different ranges, so it's pretty flexible, and certainly we have history to show how many things have been written for the string quartet and nobody's getting tired of writing them. No composers that we know of, anyway, and we're the beneficiaries of all that creativity. I often tell people that it's the best time in history to be a musician.

AH: Really!

DY: Absolutely! Because you have all this amazing stuff that's been written in the past, every single era, because many composers have made their most serious efforts in writing string quartets, so you have some of the most profound pieces, some of the most beautiful pieces, some of the most touching, some of the most entertaining pieces, and it's continuing today when we have this stylistic explosion, where the boundaries of styles are so expanded.

AH: Not like: this is chamber music, this is classical music, this is jazz, this is pop...

DY: It was very difficult for Chamber Music America to come to grips with this issue, but you look at the composers who are really the ones that are showing the way forward, and they're not thinking, I can only write such and such for chamber music. They're thinking, How can I pull this in and how can I pull that in, and what ingredients am I going to use for this piece? So when you see what composers are doing, who are we to say: Okay, composers, stop being creative! That's not chamber music! So it's a very exciting time to be a chamber musician. Absolutely! In fact, sometimes I feel like I don't have enough time in the day to learn about all the kinds of music that are being written, as well as be an expert on all the historical styles as well.

AH: Well, speaking of durability, I notice that in some of your pieces I hear you slapping your instruments as well as tapping them with your bows. Do you worry about them?

DY: Make sure you hit it in the right spot! There are some places you don't want to punch your instrument, just like people. No, spank only on the rear end. *(Laughter)*

AH: This is a question I always ask the other groups I've interviewed. In a sense you've already answered it, but why, as a young person, did you choose chamber music instead

of being a soloist or playing in an orchestra? What is it about chamber music that just grabbed you?

DY: I knew very early on that I wanted somehow to make chamber music part of my profession, if I were so lucky to make professional music my living. First of all, there's so much amazing music written. Beethoven wrote nine wonderful symphonies, but he wrote sixteen incredible string quartets. There's so much music to explore it's impossible to get tired of string quartets. And then you can throw in piano trios and quintets. Even beyond all that, there's something incredibly satisfying about hearing your sound, the sound of your instrument, your voice combined with the others. Just the human dynamic of the conversation is very satisfying. I think we're all at heart social beings, so this is like the ultimate way to socialize as musicians, to play chamber music. Of course, when you're a soloist you're playing with an orchestra, but it's like you're talking to people who are strangers, so you can't really converse on the same level as you can in chamber music when you're playing with people you know really well. And as a string player in an orchestra, your individual contribution is not as significant as it is when you're playing chamber music. It can be an incredible dynamic when it functions well — and it can be dysfunctional as well, just like families, but it's every bit as satisfying as a good human relationship. I feel incredibly lucky to wake up every day and realize that I'm making my living doing this.

AH: Thank you, David. That's a really good note on which to end this interview.