

## **Why I Play Chamber Music**

19 string players talk about their passion for playing in small ensembles  
By Greg Cahill and Heather K. Scott

Over the years, *Strings* magazine has interviewed thousands of chamber players. Oftentimes, our editors and contributors have dug into the technical minutia: What led you to record Shostakovich? Which edition do you generally use for Mozart? Why did you choose that fingering? Did those metronome markings help or hinder?

But this time, *Strings* posed one simple question: Why do you play chamber music? The only direction: be spontaneous in your response.

Indeed, the replies are as varied as the music itself, as exhilarating as the interpretations of these great works, and as personal as the intimate experience of putting bow to string with one, two, three, or more fellow musicians.

### **JENNIFER CHO, violin**

I've loved chamber music ever since I first listened to the Guarneri String Quartet records as a kid. I loved the blended sounds and the feeling of the harmonies melding into one another and knew I wanted to play chamber music with my violin. Today, I look forward to sharing music with my friends and colleagues, who are some of the premiere chamber musicians in New York City. It's great to be challenged and to push each other to find different aspects of beauty in the music in sometimes unexpected places, and the combined performance is always better because you are bringing two, three, or four people's expertise into one piece.

Currently, I play a lot of chamber music by living composers, and I cherish that very much. Composers help us to understand the music more immediately, and at times, we musicians can add our ideas to a piece as well. It's probably one of the most creative collaborative processes that we bring to making music together. Oftentimes, improvisation is called for in chamber music pieces today, and to create music in the moment can make for an exciting performance that is fun, especially when you can let yourself go completely to the music.

### **VICTORIA CHIANG, viola;**

*Viola instructor at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, Johns Hopkins University; and member of the artist/faculty at the Aspen Music Festival and School*

I am privileged to play chamber music regularly as a member of the Aspen String Trio, as well as frequently with ad-hoc groups at various music festivals and at the Peabody Conservatory where I teach. The two scenarios

are very different, but both are rewarding. Playing with the Aspen String Trio allows for an in-depth experience, as my colleagues and I share similar approaches to music, and we have developed a keen understanding of each other's playing.

Performing with a new group of musicians is also rewarding. To work with musicians who approach music in a different way or with a different view brings new ideas, broadens my understanding, and brings new inspiration.

Playing chamber music pushes me to contribute fully as a musician. It requires me to come to the rehearsals with a comprehensive understanding of the work and a compelling musical view. Then to engage with colleagues who may fortify or challenge that understanding is inspiring.

Listening is one of the most important skills that we develop as musicians, and playing chamber music requires me to listen expansively—to hear the totality beyond my own part. On a personal level, the social skills I've learned in chamber music have proved beneficial in many ways. To have confidence in my own beliefs and yet remain responsive to other ideas and open to criticism has enhanced so many areas of my life.

### **JEREMY COHEN, violin;**

*Founder, Quartet San Francisco*

First of all, I should tell you that I'm writing this from Seoul, Korea, where Quartet San Francisco is enjoying its third tour in the last four years. This should help articulate to any young musician with a desire to travel and see the world that these things become possible with the work and dedication it takes to become a chamber musician.

From the time I was very young, maybe seven or eight years old and just starting out with my violin, I realized that playing music could be my window to the world. I had a strong desire to travel and see the world, share my music with people from other cultures, and be able to have that experience as an artist. Being able to write this from South Korea helps me realize that even with all the work it takes to get there, that we're here and that we are enjoying the fruits of all those years of hard work.

Of course, one gets so caught up in the nuts and bolts of operating a group, finding or creating (in the case of QSF) the literature to perform, working with like-minded players, and scheduling rehearsals and administering all of

this business, that it becomes easy to lose sight of the wonder one had as a young developing player. But at the end of the day, when we are on the road and working hard, I get to relax with the group over a special meal, along with a favorite beverage, and pinch myself and say “We have done it—*this* is the prize!” And I have to say it’s a good moment when we can acknowledge that.

When we get home from Korea, we have a few weeks to relax, rehearse, and prepare for our second tour in China. Many cities we have never been to or heard of, with millions of people in each one: Dailan, Yingkou, Jinan, Xuzhou, Nanchang Liuzhou, and, of course, Beijing.

The excitement and anticipation of exploring these new places reminds me that I am lucky to do what I do and gives us tons of fuel to keep on doing it.

I always love returning home from any QSF tour or trip abroad, whether we are traveling domestically or internationally.

I realize that this really is the manifestation of my childhood dream to see the world. I have been able to make it happen, and it’s still fun after all these years.

**PAUL COLLETTI, viola,**

*Colburn School of Music faculty*

The ABCDs of Chamber Music:

- I think it’s the best thing a violist can do.
- Without chamber music in my life,
- I’d never play anything by Beethoven.
- I like taking my viola on airplanes!
- Life is filled with joys and sorrows, ups and downs, harmony and disagreements, flow and obstruction . . . and in chamber music one encounters all of these variations. It can be an inspiring adventure with like-minded explorers, or a frustrating example of human behavior gone wrong. Chamber music is a profound metaphor for life. An unassuming teacher. The music is the catalyst. The composer creates a sonic panorama to be given life by the performers.

For the performers, it is a shared journey to develop intellectually, emotionally, and musically, and often leads to a lifetime of friendships. In this process, one learns when to stick up for what one believes, when to be gentle, when to bend or remain firm, and how to discipline one’s ego while respecting the perspective of others.

Just as in life, chamber music by its very nature brings out issues such as hierarchy, balances, choices, and sometimes one must encourage a shy personality to speak up or ask another to follow instead of lead. A 17-year-old student and a 90-year-old veteran can play together. People from different continents with contrasting musical, religious, socio-economic, and political views can put that aside for a

common purpose. Musicians of all levels can work as a team. Onstage, we are all one . . . and none of this is surprising, in fact it’s quite normal.

So why do I play chamber music?

Why wouldn’t I?

**ABE DEWING, violin;**

*Fusion String Ensemble & Cambridge Symphony Orchestra*

Chamber music has been a powerful tool in my growth as a musician, but it didn’t start out that way. My first-ever chamber performance scared me before it became a valuable learning resource. The stage was set for a Beethoven quartet performance at Agassiz Village, the summer home of the Greater Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra in 1986. My part called for a quick passage of 16th notes that was supposed to anchor the tempo while the melody was playing. It didn’t happen. The melody became a solo and I became a recluse when it came to chamber music.

A decade later, I was asked by a fellow member of the Cambridge Symphony Orchestra to play in their Chamber Player Series. This is where I reconnected to music performance in an intimate setting. The piece was again Beethoven (this time a sextet featuring two French horns) and the cellist in the group was someone who was in that disastrous performance by me the first time around. So this had all the markings of getting another chance at bat and I could not have been happier with the results.

I became the Chamber Players Series coordinator for the Cambridge Symphony Orchestra. This allowed me to lead a music organization within a music organization, from planning to marketing and all the logistics. In 2007, I created Fusion String Ensemble, which was inspired by my brother Clinton’s string chamber group *Metamorphosen*, which existed in the 2000s (led by Scott Yoo). And my chamber-music arrangements of different genres have been performed by various groups. Because of chamber music, I learned so many facets of music and its art form, for which I am truly grateful.

**EUGENE DRUCKER, violin,**

*Emerson String Quartet*

Chamber music gives me a chance to be heard as an individual, and yet also to rely on the strengths and different musical personalities of my colleagues. Most of my career is focused on the string-quartet repertoire and related collaborative works, which taken together offer me the opportunity to play some of the greatest music ever written, ranging over more than three centuries. The challenges and rewards are immense and ongoing. No technical or musical problem is ever permanently solved, except maybe on a recording, and there’s no room for complacency. We try to keep ourselves in top

shape as instrumentalists, and frequently have to re evaluate our interpretations, reassessing all sorts of decisions about tempos, bowings, and tone color.

To delve into the mysteries of the late Beethoven quartets—to experience the intimacy and spiritual depth of the slow movements, and to catapult myself from those islands of repose into the emotional and kinetic extremes of the Grosse Fuge, for example—is a privilege for me not only as a musician but also as a human being: it grants access to aesthetic realms that would otherwise not be available to me.

This music is my vocation, my life's work—if it partly defines me as a person, I cannot think of a better single way to identify myself.

**SARAH FREIBERG ELLISON,**

*Baroque cello; 'Strings' contributing editor*

Playing chamber music is one of my favorite things to do. As one of my colleagues put it, "Chamber music feeds the soul." When I was a teenager, my friends and I would get together to read through quartets—I particularly enjoyed finding fugal movements back then. When we could, we would round up enough players to bash through the Brahms sextets or Mendelssohn Octet—that was heaven! Summers were spent at chamber-music camps—and then, after my sophomore year of college, I got paid (albeit, not a lot) to perform chamber music in Ontario. Doing something I love, and getting paid for it? I've never looked back.

In an orchestra, I try to disappear within my section, but not in chamber music. What I really love is the give and take of a small group—whether in playing or discussing the music—every voice must be heard, but within a hierarchy. Who has the melody at the moment? If it's not me, I have to figure out how to support the melodic line, giving a solid foundation for it to soar above, and maybe bring out a cool harmony along the way, matching bow strokes with my fellow accompanists. But the melody is always moving from instrument to instrument, and so my role is always changing. Chamber music is dynamic that way. And while a group may work really hard at finding just the right sound in rehearsal, we may do something entirely different in performance. You are always working with, and reacting to, your chamber music partners—and you never play the same thing exactly the same way twice. I feel like you communicate on a different level with chamber music—you don't always have to speak to reach a consensus, or experiment, or get a really special sound.

One of my buddies from camp all those years ago was bitten badly by the chamber-music bug, but went into a much more lucrative field for his profession. Mid-career, he quit to start a chamber-music center, and now, with a stable of

helpers, he coaches dozens of groups of young people, including my son, who are just as sure to carry on their love of chamber music to the next generation. That makes me very happy.

**ILMAR GAVILAN, violin,**

*Harlem String Quartet*

Reality check. Sometimes when you're working on solo repertoire, you get used to your own errors—for example, you don't hear that you tend to rush or be a little flat on certain notes. Alone in a practice room, you can get used to your own "odors," so to speak, but in a quartet you have three extra sets of ears to keep you in check. Conversely, if you are a little discouraged with your own playing, three other people will be there to help you regain your perspective.

It's like having a personal trainer. When you're alone, it is convenient to make excuses and skip an hour of practice here or there. Or even skip a day altogether. However, having three other people schedule their day around rehearsal forces you to not only show up and play, but show up in shape with your part learned. People serious about fitness feel the benefit from having someone encouraging (or often irritating) them into working better and working smarter.

The quartet allows us to carry out our personal mission. Most contemporary classical musicians feel an urgent need to revive the field and attract new audiences. The reality is that our entire genre depends on it. Our historical role is not only to perfect our craft and constantly pursue excellence alone, but to become personal ambassadors for music. We need to expose and include as many young people as possible. We need to make that first impression count. We need to exude all the professional and aesthetic attributes of the music we play, while maintaining an approachable personality and a language that relates to unexposed audiences.

My group does this type of outreach sessions often, particularly in the "inner city." It truly enriches us individually to see kids jumping up and down in schools, asking all sorts of questions and sometimes excited to pick up an instrument. I think a chamber ensemble is just perfect for these types of activities. Chamber music gives us a chance to experience intimacy at work—it promotes happiness, builds character, and teaches the art of negotiation.

I find that our music world tends to be individualistic just like our society. If we have a musical- or personal-related problem, most likely we won't share it with an entire symphony orchestra. Psychological studies show that you can't really experience intimacy in a group larger than 16 people, but a quartet is a setting where it's safe enough to be vulnerable, at least regarding musical concerns. Also, it's a setting that is conducive to articulating your musical points even if it's unpopular.

Learning to yield to somebody's preference is a valuable skill to have in general, not just for music but in life.

**JOSHUA GINDELE, cellist,**  
*Miro String Quartet*

There are so many phenomenal things to love about chamber music, and I would be lying if I didn't say I was hooked from a very early age. Of course, one does not need to look any further than the repertoire itself. Many of the greatest composers chose chamber music to write their most intimate and deeply personal musical statements. Each time I revisit the timeless string quartets by such masters as Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy, Haydn, Ravel, Debussy, Schubert (the list goes on and on), I am reminded of the phenomenal quality and depth of the repertoire. Even though I have devoted my career to chamber music, I still feel as though I have only scratched the surface, and that is a wonderful feeling. Exploring this repertoire will never get old.

While each member of my quartet has a healthy ego with many opinions, we are constantly finding a balance between the four individual voices, striving to seamlessly gel into one cohesive unit. This is one of the most exciting and challenging dimensions of chamber music: the ability to bring conviction with regard to your own musical ideas, while at the same time be open to the ideas of the others in the group. Rehearsing chamber music in its ideal form is a non-hierarchical process, allowing space for each musical personality in the group to shine forth without ever losing sight of the overall goal, which is to serve the music and the composer.

Finally, I love the personal integrity that chamber music demands of the performer. With just one player to a part, you are personally responsible night after night for delivering your absolute best, and are required to stay in top shape both musically and technically. While challenging, this aspect of chamber music is also incredibly rewarding.

There is simply nothing better than being onstage with wonderful like-minded colleagues who are giving it their all. It has been tremendously heartening to devote 20 years of my career to one medium and one group. It has been a never-ending learning experience, teaching me not only about the infinitely fascinating chamber-music medium, but also quite a bit about myself in the process. However, I know that there is just so much more to learn.

So, for now, I'm going to head back to the practice room!

**MATT HAIMOVITZ, cello**

Whether I am playing Beethoven Sonatas with my friend, pianist Christopher O'Riley, or Schubert's Cello Quintet, premiering an Elliott Carter sextet, or a new song cycle by Jake

Heggie or Luna Pearl Woolf, I am entering a privileged world. It is a world that transcends the limitations of language, a world that moves beyond three dimensions or time as we know it. Without having to leave our orbit, chamber music opens our imaginations and hearts. There is a magical connection that happens between individual players in dialogue, finding a path to the composer's conception, and ultimately bringing that to life for themselves and for anyone eavesdropping. One loses track of time rehearsing the nuances of balance, role, ensemble, rhetoric, affect, sculpting sound to blend or penetrate when called for. We strive for perfection, understanding. Or one opens a bottle of wine, after a long day's work, and reads Haydn Quartets with friends into the wee hours. We seek those moments of blissful illumination, of spiritual awakening when our natures are revealed. And all the while we are reminded of the first time we used our voice with another's and regain the pure innocence of play. Once again, we are amateurs.

**COLIN JACOBSEN, violin,**  
*Silk Road Ensemble, co-founder of  
Brooklyn Rider and the Knights*

Some of my earliest memories are of my father, Eddie Jacobsen, a violinist in the Metropolitan Opera, coming home from some four- to five-hour opera and, along with friends and colleagues, proceeding to play chamber music throughout the night. I think there was some sense that what he did at the Met, (as incredible of a job that it was, and full of the richness of operatic rep and operatic backstage stories) was his job, but what he did with friends in our living room was for themselves. I grew up seeing music (and particularly chamber music) as a social, joyous occasion in which the goal was not perfection, but spontaneous communication through mutual exploration of the rich chamber music literature.

Fast-forward a number of years, and my brother Eric and I were continuing the tradition: we loved bringing friends together in discovery of music and each other, in our living room, outside of the pressures of school, teachers, and competition that characterize the conservatory experience for many. We've been lucky enough that most of our musical lives since that time have been engaged in the intimacy and immediacy that chamber music provides. Whether it's Brooklyn Rider, our quartet, the Silk Road Ensemble—a chamber music ensemble that is made up of instruments and traditions from around the world—or the Knights, the chamber orchestra we started, we are looking to keep those communication lines open, so that hopefully magical things can happen in the moment onstage. Because getting back to that place of relaxed spontaneity after digging into a piece with the kaleidoscope of views represented in any group is difficult, and

one that requires faith in the process, but one that is worth engaging in fully, with all the wits, diplomacy, and courage, at one's disposal; ears and heart open, bow on string ready to go.

Chamber music allows a depth and variety of experience that includes the one-night stand and the long-term relationship in which you can get to an incredible place of unity where you feel like you are not drawing your bow across the string, but your colleague is, and your sounds are enmeshed in the space in between the group and the notes.

**ROBERT JESSELSON, cello,**  
*University of South Carolina School of Music faculty*

Chamber music is in my blood. Growing up in New York City I had the opportunity to hear many of the great string quartets of the '50s, '60s, and '70s: the Budapest, Guarneri, Cleveland, Amadeus quartets, and such other chamber groups as the Beaux Arts Trio. I was fortunate to have been able to study with two great cellists and chamber-music players: Bernard Greenhouse and Paul Katz. And when I was young, I often read quartets and trios with amateur musicians, mentors, family friends, and colleagues. Along the way, I have found that playing chamber music with people you admire is one way to broaden your horizons as a musician, both technically and musically. It is a way to stretch yourself: listening to a colleague's sound, hearing the shapes they use in a phrase, adjusting to their intonation, feeling their rhythm—it is like having a non-verbal lesson with someone you admire.

I remember some advice that I was given a long time ago: try to play chamber music with people who are better than you—you learn so much more!

In addition to working with my own University of South Carolina colleagues, every summer I get to play chamber music with my friends at festivals such as the Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival. I grow enormously as a musician through these experiences with great musicians. Recently, I had the opportunity to join the fabulous Parker Quartet for the Schubert Quintet and the Bruch Octet. Playing with an established group such as the Parkers is a phenomenal experience—they have had 15 years of playing together, so they breathe, move, communicate, and sound like one organism. Rehearsing and performing with them was like learning a new language, with its own vocabulary, syntax, and inflection.

Chamber music is the most rarefied, sophisticated, and intimate literature in the repertoire. It draws the listener into a world that is sublime and intricate, and expresses the whole range of human emotions. It is a delicate, but intense, world in miniature.

**PAUL KATZ, cello,**  
*Member, Cleveland Quartet (1969–95); chamber-music, coach New England Conservatory of Music*

You know the old joke, “A string quartet is a four-way marriage with all of the bad stuff and none of the good stuff!” Funny—but not true! There is the exhilaration of inspired teamwork, creative give-and-take, the satisfaction of deep study, and the fulfillment of performance. And no other genre has such an immense and profound repertoire. My life has been enriched beyond measure by more than 3,000 concerts (imagine the hours of rehearsal), and as teacher and mentor of hundreds of young people possessed by the same love and passion that has driven me.

In 1962, 13-year-old violinist Pinchas Zukerman was brought to New York from Israel by Isaac Stern. Stern asked lucky me to put together a quartet. “Pinchas needs chamber music. No other form of music-making teaches listening at such a high level of awareness,” said Stern, “This is the most important training we can give him.” Yes, chamber music is an essential part of every musician's education—how to listen, lead, follow, and play, both as a soloist and to enhance another's primary line, integrate yourself as part of the whole through your own personal voice, and make music collaboratively with interpersonal chemistry. The rehearsal is an interactive, creative process that, for me, has been even more rewarding than concerts. Chamber musicians are people who like people. There is satisfaction in taking another's idea, playing it with conviction, and making it your own. In chamber music, we are part of something larger than ourselves, and yet allowed, required, to contribute our own imagination, individuality and artistry.

Yes, there is the “bad stuff” of the joke, but managing it in a chamber group develops values and skills that translate into real life, that one can use in relationships, in a business meeting, that go far beyond the purely musical experience. There is true fulfillment in compromise, cooperation, supporting and bringing out the best in your partner. A string quartet working well is a microcosm of an ideal functioning society, a role model for the world—members of Congress should play string quartets!

**CHARLTON LEE, viola,**  
*Del Sol Quartet*

Chamber music is an idealistic microcosm of global relations, with different artists coming together to create something greater than the sum of the parts.

Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but when all members are clicking, magic can happen. In the case of the Del Sol Quartet, we strive to bring the voices of living artists to our audiences. All music was new music at some point and we are making sure that

future generations will have a chance of experiencing the Beethovens and Bachs of today through our performances and recordings. Since we often work directly with composers as well as many other collaborators, from musicians of various disciplines to visual artists and dancers, our spirit of chamber music extends outward to embrace our partners as well. Humorously, in the case of dance companies or orchestras, it can be an example of how well a democracy can interface with a dictatorship. Recently, I had a chance to be involved a special cross-cultural chamber-music experience. Working with composer Gabriela Lena Frank, this project involved three other fabulous string players to form a quartet and three panpipe virtuosi from Ecuador. After an intense week of rehearsals, overcoming cultural and language barriers, the concert was deeply rewarding. Creating a unified voice by playing with different ones is simply beautiful.

**MILENA PAJARO-VAN DE STADT,**  
*Viola, Dover Quartet (winners of 2013 Banff International String Quartet Competition)*

Since I can remember, music has been a cherished social part of my life. I was born into a world of music-lovers and a family tradition of gathering to make music. It is no wonder that now I, two of my siblings, and three of our cousins are all deeply involved in music! Growing up, chamber music was always the most fun form of music-making. It had everything: improvisation, solo playing, intense listening, stacking harmonies and playing off of one another, and the social and intimate element of human connection. I played piano trios with my dad (piano) and my brother (cello), and my brother and our neighbor (now a professional jazz saxophonist!). I learned trombone and played in jazz band. Eventually, I started playing quartets with my brother and two violinist friends—this is when I first volunteered to try viola.

Playing viola in a string quartet for the first time changed the course of my life. Its unique sound and role in the group was a revelation to me—never had I felt more human through my instrument! It became my dream to play in a professional quartet, and I went on a mission to find my quartet “soul mates.” Indeed, one of my favorite things about chamber music is its social aspect, but there is an even greater and more rewarding aspect: growth and learning from one’s musical partners. Working closely with the Dover Quartet for the past six years has made me continuously grateful for the three extra sets of ears and brains with which to dissect each other’s playing, delve deeply into the music, and thereby grow exponentially faster every day. It is extremely humbling, mind opening and, ultimately, that much more fulfilling. Not to mention the string quartet and chamber-music repertoire is frankly unbelievable, and limitless!

**BARRY SHIFFMAN, violin and viola,**  
*Associate Dean and Director of Chamber Music at Glenn Gould*

I have often wondered what really attracts me to chamber music. We know that the vast repertoire itself is full of extraordinary compositions, but I have often derived great joy from playing less than brilliant works, so it is much more than the attraction to great music. At its core, chamber music is the art of conversation. I grew up in a large Jewish family where dinner time conversation was passionate, important, and central to family life. There were many strong voices and the ability to be heard and to support the voice of others was an intense and rewarding experience.

My time with the St. Lawrence Quartet (1989–2006) reminds me of those dinners. Our rehearsals were not for the faint of heart. We approached music making as though the decisions made were of the utmost importance. This collaborative approach to exploration and discovery is exhilarating and when, collectively, you can share the results with an audience and see how they react to the power of the music and performance. There is nothing like it.

**ARNOLD STEINHARDT, violin,**  
*Guarneri String Quartet; Colburn School of Music faculty*

The first chamber music I ever studied and performed as a teenager was Mendelssohn’s D minor Piano Trio. The work moved me, touched me, and delighted me, but somehow I never thought of it as chamber music. It was simply a miraculous piece of music with an added feature to it. As a violinist, I had to relate musically, technically, and socially with the cellist and pianist, the other two members of the group. This meant that I had to know the score, know what I wanted, and find a way to communicate honestly, yet respectfully, to the others. It was also a situation in which I had to wear different hats and exchange them quickly if necessary. I might have to be a soloist one moment, a humble accompanist the next, and at other times a team player in joyous three-part harmony. That is in essence what chamber music is: some of the greatest music ever written that challenges a player’s technique, musicianship, and social skills on the very highest level. That is what I loved about that first chamber-music experience of mine and that is what I still love about it to this very day.

**MARK SUMMER, cello,**  
*Turtle Island Quartet*

As a founding member of the two-time Grammy Award-winning Turtle Island Quartet, it sometimes surprises me that I’ve managed to stay and thrive in a string quartet for almost 30 years. Quartets are notorious for bringing out the collective craziness of its members; after all, we’re all playing the same instrument in

different sizes. In our group, not only are we all string players, but we're all composers and arrangers, so it's possible to step on each other's toes in a myriad of ways. Believe me when I tell you that it's even less fun to be taken to task for an error in say, inadvertently doubling a voice in your score, than having it pointed out that you are playing out of tune.

Writing chamber music is an exercise in musical vulnerability, as composing for string quartet seems so much more precarious than writing for say, a jazz band. There's no piano and/or drums to hide behind. However, there is so much intimate joy in both writing for and playing chamber music, whether in a jazz string quartet or a more traditional chamber-music ensemble that transcends the difficulties experienced. What remains at the end of the day is often a feeling of having created something much larger than what seemed possible at the beginning of the concert, or even a rehearsal. The scary feeling of being on the spot that I've often experienced as I take my seat onstage has been replaced by a triumphant rush at pulling off what seemed highly unlikely at the beginning: the victory of transforming an ordinary evening with an audience unfamiliar with power of the chamber music into an auspicious, possibly even life-changing event. And hearing from audience members that this was as good a concert as it gets. When I think of chamber-music groups around the world performing against tremendous odds financially, and doing such amazing work artistically, it is humbling and strengthens my commitment to this most magical of arts.

**MELIA WATRAS, viola,**

*Associate professor of viola, chair of strings, Adelaide D. Currie Cole endowed professor at the University of Washington*

Chamber music is a wonderful collective experience, among the performers, and with the audience. I have been quite fortunate to get to work with amazing colleagues in the Corigliano Quartet, Open End, and other groups, at festivals, and in my own community in Seattle.

When you're working with inspiring people and things are clicking, there's nothing quite like the chamber-music process. The rehearsals are a forum where one can bounce ideas off of colleagues, get varying perspectives on a piece, and dissect and examine music in a meaningful way.

We all have different strengths as musicians, and it's really exciting to learn from each other and think about things in a new way. No matter where you are in life and career, chamber music is a learning experience: a chance to experiment, listen, and grow. Chamber music also has provided me with some of my most cherished onstage experiences. There is electricity in the air when things are really "on"—a sense of spontaneity and creativity that happens when people are listening intensely and responding. It's thrilling to play a phrase in a way you've never even thought of before, on the spot, in answer to something new from one of your colleagues.

When a chamber group has this kind of energy and spark, the result is greater than the sum of its parts, and it's magical.