



# POSTCARD FROM THE EDGE

Guided by the vision of its leader, Quartet San Francisco continues to move the chamber-music world into uncharted waters

*By Brian Wise  
Photos by Josh Madson*



**Q**uartet San Francisco is midway through the third tune in a winter concert at Symphony Space in New York when havoc ensues: the small theater's air-conditioning system groans into action and a gust of wind sends scores soaring off the musicians' stands. The string quartet at first tries to carry on, but to no avail. Shouted requests to the tech crew are made, jokes dispensed with, and the errant fan is shut off. The snafu, however incidental, seems an apt metaphor for the improvisatory, funny, striving, and occasionally turbulent existence of Quartet San Francisco.

During the past 18 months, QSF has relaunched with a new manager and three new players: cellist Kelley Maulbetsch, violinist Matthew Szemela, and violist Chad Kaltinger. Jeremy Cohen remains the quartet's first violinist, composer, arranger, and guiding force. Recently, QSF released *Pacific Premieres*, its first album since 2009, containing multimovement compositions by California jazz composers Patrick Williams, Vince Mendoza, and Gordon Goodwin; the latter two were each nominated for 2013

Grammy Awards for Best Instrumental Composition.

Amid the recent changes, QSF's artistic focus remains an ambitious amalgam of jazz, tango, blues, funk, and cartoon music, including arrangements of seminal works by Dave Brubeck, Raymond Scott, Astor Piazzolla, and Leonard Bernstein. Cohen says his aim is simple: to keep a venerable 250-year-old form vibrant for new audiences.

"I thought if I could take music that was familiar to me and to the audiences and express it in chamber music, it would contemporize chamber music," says Cohen, while eating Chinese takeout in a dressing room at Symphony Space. "More primarily, it would introduce music through the string quartet that was part of the life experience of the audience and the performers."

Even in San Francisco, with its long tradition of inventive string ensembles, Cohen, 56, admits that QSF's expansive repertoire has been a mixed blessing. It connects with a wide mix of fans, but the crossover reputation carries implications in the minds of skeptical presenters. Even the quartet's frequent recognition by Grammy voters



(resulting in five nominations) has occasionally been fraught. "The hardcore classical people either don't like us or don't know us," he says of the Grammy voters. "We're not playing the iconic works. What we do is different from other groups, and there's not really a home per se in the Grammys for us, for the style of crossover that we do."

Quartet San Francisco grew out of a series of ad-hoc string quartets that Cohen organized, starting in the early 1990s, for the San Francisco Symphony's Adventures

in Music program, which brings professional musicians into the city's public elementary schools. Cohen, who grew up in the Bay Area and studied violin with Itzhak Perlman at Juilliard, was briefly a member of the famed Turtle Island Quartet and played in several Broadway touring productions. His pickup quartets for the symphony continued on and off until 2001, when he realized that kids were connecting with one theme in particular: his arrangement of the *Pink Panther* theme song, featuring frequent violist collaborator, Emily Onderdonk.

So, Cohen and Onderdonk gathered Jeremy's brother, Joel Cohen, who plays cello, and James Shallenberger, a violinist, and began working together on an album under the name Quartet San Francisco. Released in 2002, it featured "Pink Panther" as well as music by Dave Brubeck and Raymond Scott (his music was used on more than 120 Warner Bros., Looney Tunes, and Merrie Melodies cartoons), some Argentine tangos, and a Stevie Wonder tune. "The feeling I get is Jeremy started writing arrangements of tunes that he really wanted to play," says



Quartet San Francisco's Jeremy Cohen, Matthew Szemela, Chad Kaltinger, and Kelley Maulbetsch

Onderdonk, who remained with QSF until 2008. “I got inspired by working with Jeremy and thought, I could do this.”

Onderdonk remembers the early years as full of struggle, humor, and creative leaps. Jazz techniques do not come naturally for some classical string players, no matter how resourceful, and there’s the dicey question of how to emulate bass and drums. “When all four instruments have the same sonority and timbre, you have to really work hard to create the different elements of jazz,” she says. “Learning new techniques will change the timbre a little.”

QSF at times struggled to sell their concept to presenters. Cohen and Onderdonk spent countless hours pitching themselves on the phone or at industry conferences, often to be told that a jazz-flavored string quartet didn’t fit on a given concert series. “It was tons of work and push, push, push,” says Onderdonk.

As evidence of its classical roots, QSF doesn’t do open jamming or even extended improvisation in the manner of Turtle Island Quartet, but instead plays through-composed charts (with occasional elaborations). In the group’s outreach performances for schoolchildren, they focus heavily on the fundamentals of composition and string technique.

Ron Gallman, the San Francisco Symphony’s director of education, says QSF remains on the orchestra’s series because of the quartet’s ability to demonstrate many genres, but also to talk about composing and arranging. “Making sure students know the difference between arco and pizzicato, the elements of dynamics and expression, the idea of rhythm and repetition—they can talk about it in a particular kind of way,” Gallman says.

Whereas the Turtle Island Quartet has specialties in bluegrass and South Indian ragas, QSF developed a particular expertise in playing tango. For several years, Cohen was concertmaster in a touring production of the musical *Forever Tango*, and in 2004, he entered QSF in a tango music competition at the Consulate General of Argentina in New York. To its surprise, the quartet took the top prize, beating out several tango specialist groups, and winning a trip to Buenos Aires to perform at the Cafe Tortoni and other venues.

‘I thought if I could take music that was familiar to me and to the audiences and express it in chamber music, it would contemporize chamber music.’

—Jeremy Cohen

In 2005, QSF released *Látigo*, an album of Argentinean, Brazilian, and Latin arrangements that received Grammy nominations for Best Classical Crossover and Best Engineered Classical album. The quartet’s next two albums—the eclectic *Whirled Chamber Music* (2007) and *QSF Plays Brubeck* (2009)—showed off more of Cohen’s arrangements, and both received Grammy nominations. (Cohen has made printed editions of the arrangements available for purchase.)

During this period, the quartet also underwent several personnel changes. Along with Onderdonk, cellist Joel Cohen also left in 2008.

The violinists Kayo Miki and Dawn Harms each played and recorded with the group for brief periods. In 2009, violinist Alisa Rose of the Real Vocal String Quartet stepped in. Her stint was similarly brief. Violist Keith Lawrence and cellist Michelle Djokic also joined the quartet for a time.

During our interview at Symphony Space, the four musicians banter about and describe their rapport as friendly and relaxed. The three newest members are much younger than Cohen, but bring resumes steeped in pop, Broadway, and other styles.

The voluble Cohen, who does much of the talking, notes that the QSF wants to connect more with listeners in their 20s and 30s. Currently, its audiences—evidenced by demographic data on its YouTube videos—skew toward 45- to 60-year-olds, with another group between ages 15 and 23.

“We get a young crowd because of students and string players, college-bound aspiring young string players,” Cohen says. “Then there’s an older crowd.”

QSF devotes much of its performance schedule to Northern California, particularly jazz clubs like Yoshi’s in San Francisco and Oakland, museums, and university concert series. This year is a rebuilding year, with more 100 appearances in the San Francisco Symphony outreach program. “While it was the same show every day, I think that helped a lot to develop a cohesive sound,” says cellist Maulbetsch, who joined the group in 2012.

Violinist Szemela, who also joined in 2012, agrees. “As we tackle new genres and new techniques, at times there’s a little bit of a learning curve, getting that unified vision, but I don’t know of any chamber group that doesn’t have those discussions,” he says.

“We fly happily together at this moment,” he adds, referring to famously quarrelling quartets who book separate plane tickets to avoid social interaction.

Cohen says his long-term hope is to get a teaching post in academia, but for now, plans include a tour of China in the fall.

The interpersonal dynamic is also a continual work in progress.

“I’ve learned that an impossible brilliant player is not an acceptable thing, because we do travel a lot and we need to be together and we need to be with people we like,” he says.

“I’ve always been seeking the human comfort level, because it’s critical for lasting.” ■