

## Side by Side by Side

For an ensemble to contain a couple among its members isn't all that remarkable. What's more unusual is an ensemble that consists, in its entirety, of *two* side-by-side couples. But that's the case with the **Ives Quartet**, made up of the husband-and-wife team of Susan Freier (second violin) and Stephen Harrison (cello), and the domestic partners Bettina Mussumeli (first violin) and Jodi Levitz (viola).

"It's a gay-straight alliance sort of thing," says Levitz.

The connubial nature of the ensemble has its advantages. "A string quartet becomes a family anyway," says Levitz. "In our case, it keeps us from suffering from loneliness out of town—we're there with our significant others." Levitz is aware, though, of the inherent pitfalls of mixing home life and music-making. "You have to be careful, because of that extra level of familiarity," she says. "But Bettina and I have a rule: when we work together, she doesn't treat me, and I wouldn't treat her, any better or worse than we would a stranger. A psychologist would have fun with us!"

The ensemble started out as the Stanford Quartet, in residence at Stanford University, with Freier and

Harrison among the original members. The name change came about in 1999, when the quartet left the university. As might be expected, the group performs the works of Charles Ives. But the name is meant to convey other things as well. "They chose it because of the American aspect of it, and the independent, iconoclastic idea behind it," says Levitz. "The mission has always been about being an American quartet."

The quartet's programs typically mix European classics with the works of lesser-known American composers: an Ives Quartet concert is a place where Mozart and Haydn meet Quincy Porter. The programming often unfolds in "series." Right now, the ensemble is in the midst of two contrasting projects: a female composer series, featuring works by Rebecca Clarke, Eleanor Armer, Deborah Lurie and others; and the complete set of Haydn's opus 50 ("Prussian") quartets.

The Iveses combine their performance activities with a vigorous education and outreach schedule. The group can often be found in the classroom, helping public-school students. In prosperous schools systems that have their own music programs, they serve as coaches to young string players. But their work with kids in underserved school districts may be even more rewarding.

"Of course, there's the usual 'this is a violin; this is a viola,'" says Levitz. "But it's more about finding a connection between classical music and their own lives. We'll play the Dvořák American Quartet and ask 'How many of your parents were born in another country? Are they ever lonely; do they ever miss their country?' When you relate the music to emotion, they really respond."

"We were going to play the Beethoven Opus 127 for really underprivileged kids," Levitz says. "We wondered, 'How are we going to do it?' So we talked about joy in music. We told them to listen with their eyes closed and see how the music made them *feel*. By the end of the session, those kids *understood* Opus 127." [www.ivesquartet.org](http://www.ivesquartet.org)

THE IVES  
QUARTET'S  
(L TO R)  
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