

Poiesis Quartet: Sarah Ma and Max Ball, violins; Jasper de Boor, viola; and Drew Dansby, cello.



Fast (Yet Patient) Acts of Creation

A year and half past formation, the **POIESIS QUARTET** is still finding a firm footing and a durable identity. “We know we work well together, we know we have chemistry, and we know we have something special as a group,” said cellist Drew Dansby. The budding ensemble has scored some big successes thus far, including the grand prize at the 2023 Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition. Having completed a Midwestern US tour and another in Uruguay, the group is now planning yet more tours and competitions, including a stop at the prestigious Banff International String Quartet Competition, in Alberta, Canada.

The four musicians, each between 21 and 23 years old, first played together seriously in the fall of 2022, while at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music’s advanced string quartet seminar program. “We weren’t going to stay together if we didn’t win the Fischhoff,” Dansby said. “Then we did, and it opened up a lot of things for us.” In January, the four players began a two-year program at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, for which they are studying with the noted Ariel Quartet and pursuing artist diplomas. “What we were thinking is that we will use this time to build our repertoire and figure out what we want as a quartet—what we want to say and what our vision is,” Dansby added.

Violinist Sarah Ma—the other members are violinist Max Ball and violist Jasper de Boor—discovered the word “poiesis” in a class during her initial studies at New York’s Juilliard

School. “The more I read about ‘poiesis’— which means “the emergence or creation of something that didn’t exist before”— “the more I thought it resonated with us as a group,” she said. By that, she means the quartet’s ambition for each performance to be fresh and distinctive, emphasizing music by contemporary and under-represented composers and exemplifying multi-disciplinary collaboration.

One of the ensemble’s favorite works is Chinese-Canadian composer Kevin Lau’s *String Quartet No. 3* (2014), which combines baroque, rock, and classical influences. The Poiesis played it at the 2023 St. Paul String Quartet Competition, where it took home the gold medal and the BIPOC prize, and again at the CMA National Conference in January. “That type of music is exciting for us to play because it invokes all the backgrounds and experiences that we individually have,” Ma said, making reference to the ensemble’s diverse makeup. Yet this focus on the new does not mean the group sidesteps Beethoven or Mozart. “We can play these classics alongside all these different genres and styles, and that’s what really resonates with not just us, but the majority of audiences,” she said.

The ensemble’s goal is to be a full-time quartet, but its members know this requires both a lot of work and a little luck. “It’s kind of overwhelming,” Dansby said. “because of the volume of expectations and hopes for ourselves as a group, it feels like we have to go achieve all of them right now. But we do have some time.” poiesisquartet.com ■ BY KYLE MACMILLAN