Music

Violinist Johnny Gandelsman: from Bartók to banjo

Brooklyn Rider, the string quartet he co-founded, have been pushing the boundaries of their art form

Johnny Gandelsman established the Brooklyn Rider quartet with three friends in 2005 © Rob Latour/Shutterstock

Josh Spero 11 HOURS AGO

There's a reverence attached to the string quartet as a unit: a perfectly contained foursome, heir to one of western classical music's greatest traditions, their sound an intimate conversation among friends. And then there's Brooklyn Rider.

The New York-based quartet certainly fit all those conditions. But few quartets — perhaps excepting the pioneering Kronos — have opened up their conversation to such a wide range of guest voices: they have made albums with banjo player Béla Fleck, fiddler Martin Hayes, kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor. (It's an Iranian string instrument played with a bow.)

It is not, though, a gimmick, says Brooklyn Rider violinist Johnny Gandelsman, when he speaks from his home in New York ahead of the quartet's concert at Wigmore Hall in London on September 13. "When we operate in that world for a long time, you take those experiences back to the music of Beethoven or Brahms . . . and you find ways to perform music that has been the core of our tradition and repertoire in different ways."

Take Dvořák's *American* quartet, which draws on US folk music, he says: "All the rhythmic structures that Dvořák uses in that piece, there's a very different way to play them if you're coming at it looking from the folk tradition than from the classical tradition. Once you start looking at things like that, it's everywhere." When Brooklyn Rider performed it at Wigmore Hall in July, the piece had much more of a swing, a lift, than normal.

Gandelsman, 45, was born into a musical family in Soviet Russia, before his family were part of a wave of emigration of Russian Jews to Israel in 1990, and he moved to the US to study in 1995. (His accent has layers of each of these places.) Having played in Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad Ensemble, which emphasises global musical traditions, he established Brooklyn Rider in 2005 with three friends.

The quartet — whose current line-up includes Colin Jacobsen on violin, Nicholas Cords on viola and Michael Nicolas on cello — made their name particularly with 20th- and 21st-century pieces, including more than 50 commissions from today's composers, part of a growing appetite for new works in some parts of the industry. (The Jack Quartet are another good example.) Their new album, *Starlighter* (out Friday), is a collaboration with Syrian clarinettist and composer Kinan Azmeh; Middle Eastern dance rhythms jostle alongside susurrating melodies.

Brooklyn Rider consists of Johnny Gandelsman on violin, far left, Colin Jacobsen on violin, Michael Nicolas on cello and Nicholas Cords on viola © Rob Latour/Shutterstock

Gandelsman fears audiences have become more conservative lately, partly because of a tentative post-Covid return, and wishes big institutions and big-name musicians would be bolder with their programmes. “Top classical music performers should take more risks with new music. Take five top pianists, violinists, cellists and look at their programmes at the leading venues. You’d be hard pressed to find music written in the 21st century, not to mention by women, people of colour.”

Nevertheless, Gandelsman is certain there is an appetite for new music. “When we present a programme with new and old, for example . . . an audience member who’s been listening to classical music for 40, 50 years will come up and say, ‘Wow, that new piece by Reena Esmail was really incredible, I’m so glad you played that,’ and at the same time a young member of an audience would have their mind blown by a Bartók string quartet or a Beethoven quartet.”

One positive trend in contemporary classical music is having composers who are also performers, Gandelsman suggests, which breeds “an empathy towards performers”. This makes it sound like 20th-century composers were somehow almost cruel towards musicians, no? “There was a lot of music being written that might have been very complicated to perform and also complicated for the listeners to accept and to want to hear again and again. When a composer is a performer as well, the empathy — you know what it feels like when you’re performing for an audience — you have a sense of what the audience responds to.”

What also helps new classical music stay relevant and attractive is involving voices from cultures, especially immigrant communities, outside the classical mainstream, he says. It’s “crucial” that the art form presents music from the “communities that make up a city”: “New York City is one of the most diverse places in the world and there are so many communities here that are never represented on the concert-hall stage.” It’s fair to say that Brooklyn Rider are doing their share of the work here, with their broad camp of composers.

There is a danger, he concedes, that the industry’s desire to commission new works leads to a flood of pieces which are performed once then forgotten. “The way that we operate is that the pieces we commission, we really want to perform them as much as possible and that’s what we do,” including touring and recording them.

One composer whose work is in no danger of being forgotten is Philip Glass, one of the foursome's fortes. Early in Brooklyn Rider's existence, they recorded all of Glass's quartets for his own label, and during their intense day of three concerts at Wigmore Hall in July, one was devoted to him, including the tense, melancholy piece he derived from his score for the 1985 film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, about the Japanese novelist. With Glass, says Gandelsman, "each piece is a little jewel, getting to the very core of emotion and expression."

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Although his fiddly minimalist repetitions and alternations need great skill, they also have great openness, says Gandelsman. "There's very little instruction . . . it's just an open palette, there it is and you do with it what you want, and Philip himself is very open to all sorts of ways for people to play his music. That's a great quality. There are many composers who are incredibly exact about every single second of the thing. Philip invites the performer to take ownership of his music and that's what makes it come alive to me. When we play his music, I feel like we're creating it on the spot."

Brooklyn Rider will be creating Glass's music over and over again, in fact, as they plan to perform all of his quartets on tour in the run-up to and during their 20th-anniversary celebrations.

Glass is an example, says Gandelsman, of that belief among some musicians about composers saving their best music for the string quartet. Why is that, does he think? "With four people in a room, there's no other way to be except to be incredibly intimate. You can't really do it otherwise, I don't think. You have to be open and vulnerable and sometimes it's really hard, but the reward is also pretty great."

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