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Synopsis

Told through documentary-style interviews, flashbacks, and real-time scenes, *Opus* follows the fictional Lazara String Quartet as they prepare for an upcoming engagement at the White House. The Grammy-winning group struggles through personal disputes, and their most gifted member, Dorian, is fired and goes missing. When the remaining members Alan, Elliot, and Carl hire the young, talented Grace to replace him, the dynamics of the group continue to deteriorate as the biggest performance of their lives draws closer. Michael Hollinger’s story of ambitions and passions between these friends and co-workers not only immerses the audience in the rarely seen world of classical music, but forces them to question the place of art in society and especially in their personal lives.

About the Artist

Michael Hollinger

Playwright Michael Hollinger, a Pennsylvania native, is the author of six full-length plays (all of which premiered at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company), three plays for young audiences, ten one-acts, and the co-writer of two musicals. He has also written for screen and television, including three short films for PBS about life in Philadelphia, one of which won a Mid-Atlantic Emmy for Outstanding Feature Presentation. He has won numerous awards and fellowships including a Barrymore Award, an F. Otto Haas Award for an Emerging Theatre Artist, and the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Fund for New American Plays.

Hollinger started out as a viola player in college, receiving a Bachelor of Music in viola performance from the Oberlin Conservatory in 1984. He went on to pursue a Master of Arts in theatre from Villanova. His background in music deeply influences his writing. “Plays are music to me;” said Hollinger, “characters are instruments, scenes are movements; tempo, rhythm and dynamics are critical; and melody and counterpoint are always set in relief by rests—beats, pauses, the spaces in between.”

Currently Mr. Hollinger lives in Philadelphia where he is a member of the Council on the Arts, a resident playwright with New Dramatists, and an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Villanova where he teaches playwriting.
World of the Play

“Mr. Hollinger’s Opus” from Playbill.com

By Harry Haun, 07 Aug 2007 (edited for length)

Though Michael Hollinger’s new play is steeped in a world unfamiliar to most, his exploration of musicians and the ephemeral nature of their art strikes a universal chord.

Violist-turned-playwright Michael Hollinger took the long way home. His latest, Opus, is the result of caving in to the inevitable and writing about a world he knows well—an insider’s look at a high-strung string quartet going through changes in program and personnel.

In the five plays that preceded this Opus, Hollinger fiddled away in radically different time zones on planets light-years removed from his personal experience. “Yeah, they bounce around in time and place and subject matter a lot,” he’s the first to confess.

But even that’s an understatement: his previous play, Tooth and Claw, which had a 2004 Ensemble Studio Theatre run, dealt with environmental conflicts in the Galapagos Islands. It was preceded by Red Herring, the portrait of a Boston marriage during 1950s McCarthyism. Before that was Tiny Island, which concerned two estranged sisters and their faded movie palace on the Philadelphia Main Line of the early 1980s. Then there was Incorruptible, which took place in a French monastery in 1250 and focused on the holy-relics market. An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf, his first full-length play (which Primary Stages did in 2000), was about culinary and bullfighting arts in 1961 Paris.

All six of these plays world-premiered at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company under the direction of that company’s artistic director, Terrence J. Nolen. Last year Hollinger and Nolen both won that city’s Barrymore Awards for the work they did on Opus. The fact that this Opus came easily to him surprises Hollinger, who was classically trained at Oberlin Conservatory and heading for a career as a violist when, at age 22, the notion of a lifetime of practice suddenly weighed like lead on him. He took a sharp turn into theatre at Villanova University, where he got his M.A. and is now an assistant professor of theatre. Only recently, after 20 years, did Hollinger pick up the instrument again and start playing with a quartet near his home in Wyncote, PA. One thing leading to another, Opus began pouring out of him like volcano lava.

“This play came very quickly,” he admits. “I think part of the reason is it takes place in a contemporary world—one that I know well, one that I’m very passionate about—so I didn’t have to, as I’ve done with some of my plays, do five or ten years of research on it.

“I like that this play followed Tooth and Claws, which took nine years from conception to production. I had to learn all sorts of biology and something about evolution and travel to Galapagos and do research on the various creatures there. It’s got Spanish in it and Latin. Finally I thought, ‘Okay. Let’s go indoors. Four chairs, five people, a world that I know.’”

Four chairs and five people could be this play’s synopsis: days before a televised White House concert, the Lazara String Quartet fires its violist and replaces him with a young woman whose skill inspires the group to prepare a monster of a composition—Beethoven’s Opus 131. Doubling the difficulty of the assignment is the fact that the heretofore all-male group has been invaded by somebody of a different gender and a different generation.

“In some ways, this is my most personal play,” Hollinger allows. “The characters are closer to me, demographically. They’re guys in their 40s, all in different domestic situations. One is a dad with two kids. I’m a dad with two kids. One is a violist. I was supposed to be a professional violist. Chamber music has been very good to me, and I finally felt like, ‘Maybe I can actually write a chamber play about chamber musicians, composing a kind of music with the voices of the characters.’ There are writers who are incredibly intricate with the rhythms of their work, and that’s really important to me, too. In some of my plays—say, An Empty Plate—it’s a very stylized language—heightened—
it’s not designed to sound like life. Opus is the opposite of that. Opus is designed to sound like people we meet all the time. I’ve worked my way to the present, to naturalism.”

“All of Michael’s work deals with rhythm and tone,” interjects his conductor—er, director—Nolen. “Even when we are casting other plays, Michael will say, ‘Hmm, I think this character is a bass.’ Sound and the musicality of the piece are very important to both of us.” So did Nolen “do a Doyle”—i.e., engage actors who could play musical instruments à la John Doyle’s Sweeney Todd and Company?

No. “There’s a way we have action and soundtrack together that’s beautiful and precise. It tells the audience the actors are not playing. We hired a quartet from Philadelphia’s Curtis School of Music to play the score, and the cellist came up afterwards and said, ‘When you told me what you were going to do, I thought it would never work, but watching it—even though I could hear us playing—I totally assumed the actors were.’ It’s a combination of things. There’s a choreographed, stylized approach that allows us to put the emphasis on the bowing. What we didn’t know was how effective we would wind up being. Philadelphia is a hotbed of classical music.”

In Hollinger’s view, music is merely a means to The End—not the end itself. “It seems to me that, if it were just about a quartet, it would be a very limited world view,” he reasons. “Virtually anything a performer says about music-making is of an ephemeral nature. And, of course, the level above that is that life is ephemeral and the notes we make decay. Life is what we make of the notes in the time that we are able to make them.

“The title is, y’know, Opus. It’s about work, what we leave behind us when we’re done.”

### A Glossary of Musical Terms used in Opus

- **Adagio** Slowly
- **Allegro** Fast
- **Crescendo** Gradual rising in volume
- **Concerto** A composition for an orchestra and one or more solo instruments.
- **Diminuendo** Gradual falling in volume
- **Double Stop** Playing two notes simultaneously
- **Dynamics** The various degrees of loudness called for in performance
- **Espressivo** Expressive playing
- **Hairpins** Nickname for the signs < and > which represent crescendo and diminuendo respectively.
- **Forte** Loud
- **Key** System of notes or tones based on and named after the key note e.g. Symphony in the key of C minor.
- **Largo** Very slowly
- **Ma non troppo** But not too much (ex. Adagio ma non troppo = slow, but not overly)
- **Measure/Bar** Standard unit of measurement in music.
- **Molto** Very. Used with other terms (i.e. Molto Espressivo)
- **Off-the-string** The bowing is lighter and “bounces” off the strings
- **Opus** A musical composition; a work
- **Piano** Softly
- **Pizzicato** A mode of playing in which the musician plucks the strings with their fingers
- **Poco** Little (e.g. poco crescendo = small rise in volume)
- **Ritardando** Gradually slowing the tempo
- **Sforzandos** A sudden, strong accent on a note or chord.
- **Vibrato** A tremulous or pulsating effect produced in an instrumental or vocal tone by minute and rapid variations in pitch. On strings produced by quick vibrations of the fingers.
- **Vivace** Lively, brisk, bright
Some Background on the Composers & Music Mentioned in Opus

**Bach (1685-1750)**  Johann Sebastian Bach’s myriad works such as The Brandenburg Concertos and The Well-Tempered Clavier shaped and defined the Baroque period. Bach’s robust contrapuntal style exhibited a mastery of harmonic and motivic organization. In life, Bach was highly respected for his talents as an organist; he was not widely recognized as a great composer until the early 19th century.

**Bartok (1881-1945)**  Béla Viktor János Bartók was a Hungarian composer and pianist born in March 1881. Bartok is perhaps most famous for his innovative compositions that broke down the traditional diatonic harmonies and revived nationalistic and indigenous musical themes.

**Beethoven (1770-1827)**  Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the most influential composers of all time, was a crucial figure in the transition from the Classical to the Romantic eras. He is most well-known for his nine symphonies, but he also composed piano music and several chamber music pieces. Beethoven’s Opus 131 (1826) is composed of 7 movements; it was the composer’s favorite from the late quartets.

**Kreisler (1875-1962)**  Fritz Kreisler was an Austrian-born American violin virtuoso and orchestral composer, famous in his day for his characteristic sweet tone and expressive phrasing. Kreisler composed a number of pastiches (“sound-a-likes”) which were originally credited to early music composers such as Vivaldi.

**Mozart (1756—1791)**  Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a prolific and widely renowned composer of the Classical period. He composed a wide array of music including symphonies, sacred choral music, quartets, quintets, and music for solo instruments. K 590, or String Quartet No. 23 in F major (1790) was the last quartet he ever wrote.

**Pachelbel (1653—1706)**  John Pachelbel was a German composer of the Baroque era. His most famous piece, Canon in D Major, was originally written for three violins and a bass. The widely popular work, commonly referred to as Pachelbel’s Canon, has been rearranged in several different instrumentations and has emerged as one of the Baroque period’s most recognizable compositions.

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An Excerpt from The Beethoven Quartet Companion
by Robert Winter

Robert Winter’s book, The Beethoven Quartet Companion, is an in-depth look at the history and musicianship in the seventeen quartets he composed over his life time. In the following Preface to his book, he discusses the history of the string quartet and its struggles and eventual rise as a form of chamber music.

The fame of Beethoven quartets has rested appropriately on their musical virtues. As might be expected, the substantial literature on the quartets has focused on Beethoven’s stylistic contributions to this central pillar of the chamber music repertoire. While several recent studies have dealt with sketches or with biographical and programmatic aspects of the quartets, none has inquired into how—and on what kinds of instruments—these works might have been performed before the era.
of sound recordings, into the performers who brought them to a growing public, or into the circumstances under which they performed.

Since the Beethoven quartets occupy the same lofty position in the domain of chamber music as the symphonies do in orchestral music, neglect on this scale seems, at first glance, puzzling. Great energy has been expended, for example, studying the manner in which Beethoven’s keyboard and orchestral works were performed during the nineteenth century. We know a great deal about the lineage of pianists that leads from Beethoven to Carl Czerny to Franz Liszt and beyond. We know almost as much about the procession of permanent orchestras founded in Liepzig, Vienna, Berlin, Boston, and elsewhere during the nineteenth century. But we know much less about the lineage that leads from the first Schuppanzigh Quartet of 1804 to the Rose Quartet founded in 1882.

If we consider for a moment the place of chamber music within the musical galaxy, the neglect is less puzzling. Romantic pianists were viewed as conquering titans whose individual feats expressed the heroic dimension of human nature. The introduction of the solo recital around mid-century institutionalized a framework within which pianists presented themselves to the public. Pianists invited a kind of hero worship that an ensemble of four string players engaged in intimate conversation could scarcely hope to arouse.

At the other end of the spectrum, orchestras were expressions of civic and regional pride. Once founded, their future existence was a near certitude. This was true even though their personnel (including the conductor/music director) often changed frequently. While principal players might earn a degree of notoriety, the departure of one or even several principles from an individual orchestra did not undermine the continued existence of that ensemble. Standing orchestras were among the first to put together subscription series that created stable, predictable frameworks within which public music making occurred. Quartets, as we shall see, were far less permanent.

Finally, the rapid evolution in instrument design that took place throughout the nineteenth century was by and large a response to the demands of the largest public forms of music—symphony, concerto, and opera. To fill the spacious new middle-class concert halls sprouting up all over Europe, louder instruments were essential. The changes in the construction of string instruments inevitably transformed the character of chamber music from an intimate private pastime into a public concert-oriented medium scarcely distinguishable in social terms from other forms such as symphony or opera. Although we might argue that Dvorak’s quartets at the end of the century are more intimate than those, say, of Brahms, both composers were by then writing for the 400-500 seat “chamber music” halls that were usually incorporated into the newest concert complexes.

On Women Composers

By Diane Ambache (edited for length)

Historically, women in music have been considered unusual and sometimes unwelcome. Now compositions of previous centuries are being heard again, and female composers, performers and musical directors are beginning to get accepted. However they still seem to receive a critical approach which relates to gender rather than ability. Here, Diana Ambache discusses her work researching music by women of the last 250 years, and the process of getting it recognized and returned to the standard repertoire.
Generalisations About the Sexes

“When E M Smyth’s heroically brassy overture to Anthony & Cleopatra was finished, and the composer called to the platform, it was observed with stupefaction that all that tremendous noise had been made by a lady.”
—George Bernard Shaw

So, men are noisy and aggressive, and women are delicate and sensitive. At least it’s clear that Beethoven was male; but it does suggest that Chopin was female, and Mozart was both.

One thing I’m sure about is that we have not yet achieved equality. Of course we could just put that down as a residue of historical habit, but perhaps there’s value in unpicking some of the issues within the unfairness. There has recently been some research done at Keele University on the ‘gendering of musical instruments’. This refers to the fact that flutes are usually played by girls and trumpets by boys. Against expectations it seems that this kind of stereotyping is becoming more enforced. Despite the fact that more girls are succeeding in music at ‘A’ level, the profession is still very male dominated, and these people are the visible role models seen by children.

History relates that the famous violinist Joseph Joachim, addressing Clara Schumann in 1870 said “As far as art is concerned, you are man enough”. In fact her phenomenal talent transcended gender divisions, not by being masculine, but through sheer brilliance, as her dazzling international performing career proved.

Another version of that compliment was made by George Chadwick to Amy Beach. On hearing her Gaelic Symphony he wrote to her “I always feel a thrill of pride when I hear a fine work by one of us, and as such you will have to be counted one of the boys.”

Are Women Different?

The gender question in regard to musicians makes me annoyed. What relevance does a person’s sex have? Doesn’t the quality of music making come more from a person’s individual character than from the generalities of their sex? Although I complain about this question I also have to admit that I have had benefits from it as well. As the Director of my own orchestra, which performs music by both women and men, I’ve received a certain amount of extra press coverage because women composers and female Music Directors are still quite rare, and considered newsworthy by the media.

Somebody once told me that women’s brains are different and simply don’t have in them the capacity to create artistically. Similarly Wilhelm Gericke (the Boston Symphony’s Musical Adviser) told Amy Cheney/Beach’s mother that her prodigy daughter should not be educated in Europe as women were intellectually less highly evolved than men. How sad that we are seen as strange animals, so “differently” endowed. Could it be that our capacity to produce new human life is so major a threat for men that they have to keep the creation of symphonies (etc) to themselves?

A Chance discovery

My involvement with music by women arose quite by chance, when I came across a description about Germaine Tailleferre’s Piano Concerto in a book on French music. Only then (aged 36) did it occur to me that I’d never heard anything written by a women composer. I was shocked to think that I had never questioned it before. Curiosity got the better of me, and I went looking for the music. With some difficulty I got hold of the Tailleferre score, and discovered an utterly delightful work from Paris in the 1920s. Then I simply couldn’t turn my back on the injustice. Why did we know nothing about music by women? What else was there that I’d never heard of? I had to find out and...
then help to set the record straight. So I went looking in libraries; the more I dug, the more I found, and the more I saw how much beautiful music has been neglected.

**Who are the women composers?**

Many people know about Schumann and Mendelssohn—Clara and Fanny, that is. Their famous surnames make them easy to remember, which is not to acknowledge that they were both exceptional individuals. Clara’s achievements as one of the greatest pianists of the 19th century is well documented. Only recently have we got to know her highly expressive voice as a composer. Fanny sustained a musical life despite considerable discouragement; her compositions, which she wrote for her own Sunday *Musicales*, demonstrate an energetic and adventurous nature.

Picking two names that are less well known, Louise Farrenc and Marianne Martinez embody some other characteristics, including steady devotion to music and sturdy determination to pursue their interests regardless of others’ attitudes.

“Mozart was an almost constant attendant at her parties and I have heard him play duets of his own composition on the piano-forte with her.” This was reported by the tenor Michael Kelly of Marianne Martinez in about 1785. Lucky woman! Martinez’s substantial canon of work indicates an ambitious imagination. She not only wrote Concertos, Sonatas, Cantatas and Masses, but also a huge dramatic Oratorio.

Louise Farrenc was also an acknowledged part of the musical scene of her day, which was Paris in the mid-19th century. She received appreciative reviews about her compositions, including compliments from Berlioz on her orchestration. One of her clever moves was to marry a music publisher, which meant that many of her works were issued in print. Her best works are for piano and chamber ensemble and her style includes some beautiful use of chromatic harmony.

**What 18th & 19th Century Women Composers Faced**

There were several reasons mitigating against women becoming composers. Usually the individuals who overcame the problems did so because of their love of music and their determination to pursue their interests regardless. Marianne Martinez is a typical example of the kind of independent mind—she wrote extensively in many genres, and clearly composed because she loved it. Farrenc illustrates another aspect, normally associated with 20th century women: the juggling act of looking after a family, performing, teaching (she was an early pioneer in the issue of equal pay for equal work) and composing. Last but not least she also did academic research: a century before the early music movement, Farrenc published the 24 volume *Tresor des Pianistes*, keyboard music of the three preceding centuries.

**Education**  The most obvious obstacle was just the lack of a proper musical education. If they were lucky, musical girls were born into a musical family (Fanny Mendelssohn), the aristocracy (the two Anna Amalias, Frederick the Great’s sister and niece), or went into a Nunnery (Hildegard, and Isabella Leonarda) and grew up with music around them.

Just as important is the whole business of learning on the job. Most of what I know about performance and communication I’ve learnt through the process of doing it, and working with my professional colleagues. Mozart and Haydn had constant feedback about their compositions in their everyday lives. Few women composers of the past had that living experience of hearing their work, learning from it, and moving on to the next level.

**Social Attitudes**  “Perhaps for Felix music will become a profession, while for you it will always remain but an ornament; never can and should it become the foundation of your existence.” This letter from Abraham
Mendelssohn to his daughter Fanny has become one of the most famous discouragements in musical history. It is also a classic expression of society’s long-held view that it was not acceptable for a woman to compose. Recently we’ve come to know of the phenomenal talents of both the Mendelssohn siblings. To the credit of their parents, Fanny received the same musical education as Felix. However restrictive social attitudes deprived us of her subsequent developments as a major creative talent.

**Self Confidence**  
Clara Schumann—virtuoso pianist, composer, teacher and mother of seven—wrote in her diary in 1839: “I once thought I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose—there has never yet been one able to, and why should I expect to be the one?” Of course I know that self-doubt is not a uniquely female characteristic, but (apologies for the generalization) there seems to be something about masculine assertiveness that covers over, or gets round this form of nerves.

**Competitiveness**  
Ethyl Smyth had a favorite legend about rivalry: one afternoon while Adam was asleep, Eve, anticipating the Great God Pan, bored some holes in a hollow reed and began to what we call `pick out a tune’. Thereupon Adam woke; “Stop that horrible noise,” he roared, adding, after a pause, “besides which, if anyone’s going to make it, it’s not you but me.” The big musical competitions are generally won by men. I have no wish to “beat” others in contest, I simply want to make music. However, we live in a very competitive world, and that may be one reason why there are less women at the top. Some people think that men’s success comes from talent while women’s comes from hard work, which is irksome in not acknowledging women’s abilities.

**Innovation**  
A criticism often leveled at women composers of the past is that they weren’t radical, original or ground breaking. There are so many ways to be creative, and any composer who finds their own authentic voice has been innovative, and I believe many women have done that. Women have made music in many unprecedented ways. With both the Schumanns and the Mendelssohns, the musical language of each pair is so close, we don’t really know who led the way, and does it matter? I don’t think they were copying each other, it was simply that the musical ideas of each household progressed as a duologue. For me Clara’s music has a thoughtful nobility all her own, connected but different from...
Robert’s unique introvert/extrovert manner. Contrast her brooding F minor Konzertsatz with Robert’s more famous A minor Piano Concerto. Felix has a fine balance of romanticism and classicism, while Fanny is passionate and excitable, and their two Piano Trios in D minor also make a fascinating comparison.

Sometimes composers are accused of being too obviously derivative of their teachers. While it’s clear what influence Farrenc got from Hummel and Moscheles, I’m shocked when I see her music described as a recycling of those styles, and I always note that the writer has shown up their own lack of hearing. The Trio for clarinet, cello and piano Op 44 illustrates her unique sense of harmony, and balance between discipline and emotion.

In another area dates can be illuminating. We think of Messiaen (b1908) as the first composer to have annotated birdsong. However Amy Beach was also fascinated by nature and her two Hermit Thrush piano pieces of 1922 include transcriptions of the birdcalls. When Marie Grandval wrote her Offertoire, evoking the heavenly Elysian sounds we associate with Fauré’s Requiem, she was some ten years before him.

In talking about the music by women which I’ve been reviving, I’ve found it helps to try and give a historical context. Usually this means referring to a male composer who was a contemporary, or with whom there are stylistic connections. I wish it was possible to place them in history without hitching them to a male reference, but I haven’t found a better way.

Conclusions

The years of work I’ve spent digging up, editing, learning and performing music by women have been challenging, stimulating and enriching in many ways. As a classical specialist, Clara, Fanny, Louise and Amy have provoked me into exploring new avenues of creative expression, and they’ve inspired me as women of tremendous character and strength. I notice that other people also seem pleased at discovering what women have created, as if it was a missing piece in our cultural heritage that is now becoming audible again.

When I started writing this article I wanted to say that gender issues are beside the point—just trendy talk. I wanted to say this is irrelevant; all that matters is the music. But I see I can’t. These questions are still vividly with us, and will be for the foreseeable future.
Discussion Questions & Exploration Activities

1. With *Opus*, Michael Hollinger hoped to write “a chamber play about chamber musicians, composing a kind of music with the voices of the characters.” Do you think Hollinger was successful? If so, how does he create ‘music’ in his script?

2. The title of the play refers to a musical term meaning a composition or “work.” Discuss why Hollinger chose this title and the different ways in which it can be interpreted.

3. Discuss Dorian’s contribution to the Lazara quartet. What necessary qualities did he bring to the group? What are the challenges that he adds to the ensemble?

4. Think of a situation where you entered into a completely new environment and had to prove yourself to an established group. How were you received? What did you have to do to be successful in this new role?

Original Sources & Links to Further Research

**About the Artist**

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