

Turtle Island Quartet to riff its brand of swing with Simple Measures

Originally published April 16, 2015 at 6:01 am Updated April 18, 2015 at 3:29 pm



“What we’ve ended up doing isn’t crossover, because how can you cross over when you’re already there?” asks David Balakrishnan, founder of The Turtle Island Quartet.

By [Jason Victor Serinus](#) /

Special to The Seattle Times

Despite being feted with two Grammy Awards for best classical crossover album, the members of the 30-year-old Turtle Island String Quartet (TIQ) initially dreaded the label “crossover.” Even as they prepare for their return to Seattle, that’s a label that the jazz string quartet

approaches with caution.

“Crossover is often associated with classical musicians trying to do something they don’t know how to do,” TIQ founder, violinist David Balakrishnan, says. “In our case, we were formed for the express purpose of doing what we’ve wanted to do since childhood: play improvised music and jazz using our classical training as string players. What we’ve ended up doing isn’t crossover, because how can you cross over when you’re already there?”

When Balakrishnan and his fellow string players return to Seattle this week, they’ll do so at the invitation of their co-performers, 10-year-old Simple Measures. Their joint program, cutely titled “It’s Island Time,” showcases the string players of both ensembles performing music from “4 + Four,” the Turtle’s 2006 Grammy-winning Telarc CD with the Ying String Quartet.

The concert will range widely across genres. In the first half of the concert, the Turtles play Bob Mintzer’s “Windspan” and Balakrishnan’s arrangement of John Carisi’s “Israel.” Simple Measures, in turn, performs select movements from Dvorak’s String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 51, and Shostakovich’s String Quartet No. 1 in C Major, Op. 49. Then, after cellists from both quartets duo on TIQ cellist Mark Summer’s “Julie-O,” both quartets perform arrangements of John Lennon’s

“Because,” and Darius Milhaud’s jazz-tinged “La Creation du Monde” (“Creation of the World”).

“Ever since we began working with the Ying Quartet in 2002, we’ve found ourselves partnering with string quartets who love a program that allows a cross-fertilization of music and genres,” says Balakrishnan. “One of the best things about it is the juxtaposition of a classical string quartet playing straight-ahead classical repertoire with our completely unexpected, really swinging string quartet exploration of jazz.

“You get to experience both the quality of the classical tradition and the possibilities of extending that tradition into the American classical music form known as jazz.” But the music itself is only one aspect of this “the medium is the message” concert. True to Simple Measures’ mission to produce nonintimidating, themed chamber performances with an informal feel, patrons will be encouraged to ask questions after each piece. As unorthodox as the Turtle Island Quartet may be in repertoire and approach, Simple Measures’ penchant for audience interaction has left Balakrishnan curious as to the outcome.

“We’re kind of like a barking cat: string players that can swing,” says Balakrishnan; this weekend he will find out just how far the cats can swing when audience members pull the strings as well.