

Jazz is at heart of string quartet repertoire

By **Randall G. Mielke**
Elgin Courier-News

MARCH 19, 2015, 1:01 PM

The Turtle Island Quartet with Nellie McKay will perform at 8 p.m. March 21, as part of the Fermilab Art & Lecture Series at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia.

Jazz music and string instruments do not usually go together unless you are the Turtle Island Quartet.

"There are other string quartets, but in my opinion, we are the first to have four musicians who have dual training in improvisational jazz and classical music," said David Balakrishnan, violinist and founder of Turtle Island Quartet. "We are like a modern jazz quartet of our times."

The Turtle Island Quartet with Nellie McKay will perform at 8 p.m. March 21, as part of the Fermilab Art & Lecture Series at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia.

Based in the San Francisco area, the jazz string quartet was formed in 1985 as result of Balakrishnan's vision.

"It was clear to me that this needed to happen," he said regarding arrangements and original songs by group members that include genres like folk, bluegrass, swing, be-bop, funk, rhythm and blues, new age, rock 'n' roll, hip-hop, Latin America and music from India.

The Turtle Island Quartet, whose name is derived from mythology found in Native American folklore, has released numerous recordings and has toured internationally for 30 years. The ensemble has earned two Grammy Awards in the Best Classical Crossover Album category: one in 2006 for "4 + Four" and another in 2008 for "A Love Supreme: The Legacy of John Coltrane." Balakrishnan and cellist Mark Summer are original members of the group. Mateusz Smoczyński (violin) and Benjamin von Gutzeit (viola) joined the quartet in 2012.

The quartet also has collaborated with numerous artists over the years including clarinetist [Paquito D'Rivera](#), vibraphonist Stefon Harris, guitarist Leo Kottke, The Manhattan Transfer, pianist Billy Taylor and the Ying Quartet, among others. The show at Fermilab is another collaboration, this time with singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Nellie McKay.

The title of the Fermilab program is "A Flower is a Lovesome Thing - Music of the Weimar Cabaret, Doris Day, Billy Strayhorn and others." McKay, who performed on Broadway in "The Three Penny Opera," will perform music of 1920's Berlin as well as standards made famous by Billy Strayhorn and Doris Day. The quartet will perform by themselves, as will McKay, and the five entertainers perform together twice in the program: once in the first half of the show and again at the end of the evening's performance.

"You have a flavor of each group and you get a sense of our 'together' sound," Balakrishnan said.

"We've done about 40 shows together," he continued. "For a show with Nellie, you cannot rely solely on virtuosity. She does singing, and the lyrics have to be fed. At the same time, we are not a back-up band. It was a great challenge and it came out well."

According to Balakrishnan, who started playing violin when he was nine years old, his career also has worked out well.

"The most satisfying part of my career is also the most challenging," said the 60-year-old musician. "The violin is a hard instrument to play. Sometimes I will listen to the radio and hear a Beethoven violin concerto and I would have loved to play like that. But I found my way. Being a composer in a string quartet was the right thing for me."

Randall G. Mielke is a freelance writer.

Turtle Island Quartet with Nellie McKay

When: March 21

Where: Ramsey Auditorium at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Kirk Road and Pine Street, Batavia

Tickets: \$15-\$30

Information: 630-840-2787 or fnal.gov/culture

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