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## Young quartet juggles music, work, life

*BY MARK STRYKER*

*FREE PRESS MUSIC WRITER*

They grow up fast. Seven years ago, the four fresh-faced students in the Biava Quartet made their local debut at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival as part of the Shouse Institute, a training program for young ensembles.

Next week, the Biava returns to the festival with a reputation as one of the best young quartets on the scene and such a busy itinerary that it recently has had to turn down work. The players, age 30 and under, still look like kids, but now they're the mentors, not the students.

The two-week Great Lakes festival, which opened Saturday and runs through June 21, includes 17 concerts throughout metro Detroit. The festival has earned a national reputation for its A-list artists and inventive mix of contemporary music, repertory staples and overlooked treasures. The Shouse Institute has also helped launch the careers of a striking number of significant young American chamber ensembles, including Eighth Blackbird, Claremont Trio and the Pacifica, Jupiter, Parker and Biava string quartets.

Two members of the Biava spoke recently about the group's swift ascent through the ranks.

### **QUESTION: What made you decide to form a string quartet?**

**MARY PERSIN (viola):** We all loved chamber music and quartets in particular, and we landed at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where they encourage chamber music. We were excited and had big dreams. We were very young -- 17 and 18 -- and we had known each other from festivals.

We got together and decided we wanted to play the Brahms C Minor Quartet, and we tried to read through it. Our coach said, "Let's try some Haydn," but he did it in such a way that was so positive and encouraged us. The Brahms is not the kind of piece you want to start with!

### **Q: Did you imagine a career of concerts, touring, recording and the like?**

**PERSIN:** We had those aspirations and probably didn't know what it would take. But we were focused on making it a possibility. We were known at the school for being very intense. We rehearsed every single day.

**Q: After graduation you entered a specialized quartet program at the New England Conservatory and began playing concerts and entering international competitions. Tell me about the Shouse Institute in 2002 and 2003.**

**HYUNSU KO (violin):** We were students but treated as young professionals. We got to work with coaches, but we played a lot of concerts and spent time with them outside of the concerts and got to

understand what the life is about -- the commitment.

**PERSIN:** We were coached by senior players, but we also collaborated with them. They expected a lot from us. We had to come with our music learned and ready to interface with audiences and donors.

**Q: There are so many young quartets on the scene. How do you create your own identity?**

**PERSIN:** We try to model the excellence that we strive for in our playing into everything we do. Always giving great concerts but also quickly turning around information when we correspond with people. Being diverse, being able to teach and do residencies, speak with donors. We have never tried to be a group that does niche repertoire. We want to be able to wear as many different hats as possible and do anything we can to stretch our boundaries.

**KO:** We are still very young, though we have been together 10 years. We have a very strong communication, sound and sensitivity. Those have become hallmarks.

**Q: What's the most challenging thing playing in a quartet?**

**PERSIN:** Finding a way to maintain the balance of individuality and diversity. In a quartet, you have the dichotomy of four strong independent people who also function as an ensemble. And realizing that we have four individual lives and people are now married, and finding a way to keep all that in balance.

**KO:** When we started, the only thing we had to worry about was convincing music-making. Now we have to be great artists but also be able to communicate to the audience, deal with the business and all of us have a personal life.

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## Additional Facts

16th annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

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Through June 21

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