



Clockwise from top:
PRISM'S McAllister, Levy,
Sullivan, and Shemon

HOW TO SUCCEED AS A SAXOPHONE QUARTET—BY REALLY TRYING

Beginning three decades ago as an outlier in the ensemble field, PRISM has been both daring and businesslike. It has built a career—and a repertoire for a new generation.

BY David Patrick Stearns

In its Mozart-deprived world, a saxophone quartet has to be ready for yet-unimagined opportunities. For the 30-year-old PRISM Quartet, the “unimagined” concept has taken the group into the vibrating sands of the Gobi Desert; inside the psyche of a frenetic, would-be elected official in Ohio; and to places that might not actually be places.

“The threshold of structure and disorder, individuality and community, understanding and mystification, and the known and the unknown” is how one of the latest PRISM commissions, *15 Places at the Same Time*, is described in program notes by its composer, the saxophonist Steve Lehman. It is one of six new works in the group’s 2014 *Heritage and Evolution* programs, premiered this past spring in Philadelphia and New York City. Like *15 Places*, the other five pieces were composed by (and performed with) jazz saxophone luminaries—Dave Liebman, Rudresh Mahanthappa, Greg Osby, Tim Ries, and Miguel Zenón.

“Some of the hardest stuff we’ve ever seen,” is how Timothy McAllister, PRISM’s soprano saxophonist, describes the Lehman commission. “And we’ve seen it all.” With quiet matter-of-factness he adds, “Honestly, we need that. Otherwise we’d get into ruts. One movement Steve Lehman wrote was born out of improvisation. What’s on paper looks like the most advanced stuff you’d ever see ... we had to practice it individually just to bring it together. It was an amazing display.”

Rudresh Mahanthappa, is—like most jazz composers—not accustomed to writing thoroughly notated works. He describes his *Heritage and Evolution* piece for PRISM as a combination of elements of South Indian music with a jazz groove. At the Philadelphia premiere, he prefaced the performance by screening—of all things—the YouTube video-gone-viral of Republican Phil Davison campaigning for treasurer of Stark County, Ohio. Its relevance to the composer was crucial. Davison’s over-the-top rant, during which he speaks the sentence adopted as the work’s title—*I Will Not Apologize for My Tone Tonight*—resembles nothing so much as a 21st-century bel-canto opera mad scene. Watching it, Mahanthappa said, helped him get through episodes

of writer’s block. “Backstage when the video was playing, Rudresh was mouthing it word for word,” says Matthew Levy, PRISM’s tenor saxophonist and longest-standing member.

Levy relates this without judgment. The composer’s process is what it is, and requires fresh cognitive skills for every piece. A complicating factor is that PRISM members live all over the country and can’t always converge—with one another or with composers—when or as much as they would like to. The quartet formed originally at the University of Michigan some four personnel changes ago; that it has a Philadelphia address is mainly due to Levy, 50, whose full-time job is running the ensemble. McAllister, 41, is the group’s soprano saxophonist and probably its best-known member. He’s about to move from Northwestern University to University of Michigan and premiered the John Adams Saxophone Concerto in 2013. Alto player Zachary Shemon, 30, recently succeeded founding member Michael Whitcombe, who died last year at the age of 50. (The *Heritage/Evolution* project is dedicated to Whitcombe’s memory.) Shemon teaches at the University of Missouri in Kansas City.

Taimur Sullivan, 44, on baritone sax, is faculty at the North Carolina School of the Arts and Manhattan School of Music. Recently, the foursome resorted to “rehearsing” by Skype—a surprisingly productive experience, they report, though more verbally than musically.

“So much about learning a new piece is from hearing composers talk about the character of the sections, the shifts of mood, what they’re trying to get across and how we make it get off the paper,” says Sullivan. “And then we show up [for an in-person rehearsal] and have our parts completely learned.”

Drawn to the saxophone quartet’s range possibilities, from homogenous blends to extreme solo opportunities, composers have written some 170 pieces for PRISM. Realistically, the group can only hope that 20 percent of them will—like William Albright’s 1992 *Fantasy Etudes*—have staying power. But which works fall into that 20 percent naturally can’t be predicted. The Donald Sinta Quartet recently won the Young Artist Concert Guild Award with repertoire



Watch PRISM and Rudresh Mahanthappa performing *I Will Not Apologize for My Tone Tonight* at www.chamber-music.org/extras



PRISM circa 1987. Left to right: Tim Miller, Matt Levy, Michael Whitcombe, and Reginald Borik

that was mostly PRISM-commissioned. “That’s the greatest honor we could have,” says McAllister.

These days, PRISM is steering away from commissioning works as isolated entities and turning instead to pieces that are part of larger concepts. “We’re thinking two and three years ahead of time with a series of concerts that are all interconnected,” says Levy. “We have these brainstorming sessions every month or so and are always sharing ideas and thinking ahead of what we’d like to do.” And, Levy explains, it happens that foundations like that kind of “conceptual virtuosity,” as it’s now called.

Of course, composers often go their own way in the end. The charmingly inventive *Bang* on a Can minimalist Julia Wolfe, in her first PRISM commission, has something more vernacular to spring on the group: *The Cha Cha*, an allusion to the Cuban dance rhythms that hit the pop charts in the 1950s and ’60s.

“It’s in memory of my dad,” says Wolfe. “One of my fondest memories was dancing the cha-cha with him at ridiculous occasions—bar mitzvahs and such. He loved to dance, and he’d pull me out on the dance floor when I was 12 years old. So it’ll be the cha-cha. I’d love to do it with some film of people doing the actual dance.”

Standards are high in PRISM’s world, but standardization is all but nonexistent. One is tempted to see PRISM as a wind-instrument counterpart to the Kronos Quartet, though the comparison doesn’t quite hold up: Though both seem similarly adventurous, Kronos is at least anchored in the bedrock of the string quartet tradition. A better comparison might be eighth blackbird, whose lineup’s main precedent was Schoenberg’s instrumentation for *Pierrot Lunaire* and which also started with a clean slate.

PRISM came into a world that almost exclusively associates saxophones with jazz. Of course, the 200-year-old instrument, invented in France by Adolph Sax, pre-dates jazz and sidestepped it with Glazunov’s *Saxophone Concerto* and Rachmaninoff’s *Symphonic Dances*. But much of the pre-jazz music for saxophone quartet is what PRISM members describe as French and academic. And if few other saxophone quartets have forged beyond that territory, it’s probably because their existence has tended to be a graduate-student activity that ended with graduation.

Concert opportunities for saxophone quartet aren’t as limited as in decades past, though presenters who book the same well-known string quartet annually will take a saxophone quartet only every three years or so. Yet PRISM plays a healthy 30 concerts a year, some of them, such as the *Heritage/Evolution* series, being self-presented.

Just because those engagements allow the ensemble to choose its venues doesn’t mean it has found a proper home. Of the two *Heritage/Evolution* venues, New York City’s Symphony Space has the right off-the-beaten-track feel but is a bit too much like a traditional concert hall for PRISM’s taste. Philadelphia’s World Café Live, an eclectic supper club, comes closer, with audiences seeming remarkably undistracted by food-and-drink activities around them. If the world doesn’t know where to put the PRISM Quartet, it’s because, as the World Café concert’s host, NPR commentator Tom Moon, put it, “Very few groups in the world are doing this kind of work.”

The fifteen or so professional saxophone quartets in the U.S. occupy various points on the jazz–classical spectrum. On the jazz side are the World Saxophone Quartet, formed in 1977 by Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill, Hamiet Bluiett, and David Murray, and Rova Saxophone Quartet, founded in 1978. Europe’s Danish Saxophone Quartet, begun in 1986, plays transcriptions of Bach’s *Art of the Fugue*, among other things. The Wisconsin-based Ancia Saxophone Quartet is hugely welcoming to young composers, even accepting unsolicited scores and proving, with its two women members, that the medium is not necessarily a “guy thing.” Perhaps the oldest group of all, the German-based Rascher Saxophone Quartet, formed in 1969, has worked with the likes of Philip Glass. Against that backdrop, PRISM seems to do a bit of it all. One of the latest PRISM recordings on the Innova label is a two-disc anthology of Levy’s works, titled *People’s Emergency Center*, a congenial demonstration of the wide possibilities for one of music’s great chameleons; its offerings encompass the lyricism of Rachmaninoff and the never-ending adventures of jazz.

However, PRISM’s long-term survival isn’t just about virtuosity, passion and versatility. Levy has had deep experience in the grant-making world. In fact, he ran the music program of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage from 2000 to 2011. “They liked the program we were presenting and . . . and asked, ‘Would you like to run the music program?’ And I honed my skills more by providing feedback on their

"THESE DAYS, PRISM IS STEERING AWAY FROM COMMISSIONING WORKS AS ISOLATED ENTITIES AND TURNING INSTEAD TO LARGER CONCEPTS."

projects." PRISM is now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, with Levy as executive director (a full-time salaried position with benefits) and a staff, including program associate, an intern, and a marketing coordinator, plus a board of directors with four committees.

Like many performing artists well known in their fields with a strong institution behind them, PRISM has had the inevitable date with China, specifically at the Beijing Modern Music Festival last summer. The group arrived with a clutch of new works, reflected on its disc *The Singing Gobi Desert*, by contemporary composers such as Bright Sheng and blending PRISM with traditional Chinese instruments so fluidly that they sound like long-lost family. Even the deep drone emitted by Gobi Desert sand rubbing up against itself sounds like a baritone sax. "All of what they're writing," says Shemon, "is inspired by gesture and song and poetry. And a lot of what they're asking the instrument to do can be approached because of its flexibility and vocal quality."

"Some of the strumming effects and tapping effects from their own instruments, we can emulate with key clicks and breath sounds," says McAllister.

Yet Chinese audiences didn't immediately or necessarily recognize these composers—who are of the Cultural Revolution generation and have long lived in the U.S.—as their own.

In conservatories the ensemble visited—Tianjin's had 40 saxophone majors—the students were curious. Some were still playing what might be called Saxophone Stone Age repertoire by Glazunov, and Bright Sheng was utterly foreign to them.

Of the China experience, McAllister says, "The only negative is the air pollution. It was unbearable. It has a real impact on you," he adds. "We had a hard time playing concerts. We were short of breath and we were kind of miserable."

"I don't know if we'd go back, honestly, if only for that reason," adds Levy.

But what if China's most famous composer, Tan Dun, took it into his head to write a piece for PRISM?

Their eyes light up.

Knowing some of Tan's recent pieces, the quartet would probably end up playing in conjunction with, oh, eight videos of peasant women giving birth.

McAllister doesn't miss a beat.

"That's cool," he says. "We'll take it."

David Patrick Stearns is a classical music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer. He also writes for Gramophone, Opera News, and WQXR's Operavore.



Recording session: (left to right): Taimur Sullivan, Matt Levy, Tim McAllister, studio owner/engineer Aaron Nevezie, and Miguel Zenón