

A photograph of two men standing against a dark blue background. The man on the left is younger, with short brown hair, wearing a dark red turtleneck sweater and dark jeans. He is holding a violin and looking towards the right. The man on the right is older, bald with a beard, wearing a dark red V-neck sweater and dark jeans. He is also holding a violin, looking upwards and smiling. A watch is visible on his left wrist. The text 'The Playground Just Got a Lot Bigger' is overlaid in a large, white, serif font across the lower half of the image.

The Playground Just Got a Lot Bigger



Photo: Jiyang Chen

The Isidore String Quartet's fast, hard, sometimes bumpy, and ultimately joyous road to success.

by Emery Kerekes

It was late March of 2022, and cellist Joshua McClendon was in the shower. As he lathered his hair, he heard the phone he'd left next to the sink begin to vibrate—surely, another robocall about his car's extended warranty. He pulled aside the shower curtain and glanced at the caller ID: Banff, Alberta, Canada.

"I almost broke every bone in my body, jumping out of the shower to pick up the phone," said McClendon. Puddles grew around his feet on the bathroom floor as he answered, oblivious to the chilly air. The caller, a representative from the triennial Banff International String Quartet Competition (BISQC, pronounced as "bisque," rather than "Bisquick"), brought life-altering news. Less than a year after their official formation, the Isidore String Quartet, in which McClendon plays, had been accepted to the 2022 iteration of the prestigious competition.

The Banff acceptance, it turned out, was just the beginning of a meteoric rise. The Isidores won the competition, triumphing over ensembles nearly a decade their senior. U.S. presenters swiftly closed in on the newly-made stars, booking them for ambitious programs around the country. This past March, they received another high-profile boost: one of Lincoln Center's coveted Avery Fisher Career Grants.

What the Banff and Lincoln Center juries saw was a dynamic, unapologetically Gen-Z quartet, comfortable as could be in its own youthful skin. "Part of our mission is to treat the ensemble as a playground," violist Devin Moore said. Whether they play in tiny apartments or thousand-seat concert halls, the Isidores are always experimenting: with programs that contrast Bach with Billy Childs; with interpretations that balance spontaneity and profound consideration of each piece; and with performance concepts that blur the lines between concertizing and other forms of live presentation. Every concert feels intimate and casual—in some progressive way, a reversion to chamber music's parlor roots. The ensemble does all that with the comfortable, charming camaraderie of four college buddies.

Most quartets happen upon their *je-ne-sais-quoi* after years of trial and error, but with such a tight deadline, the Isidores had to make decisions. How would Beethoven sound in their idiom? Brahms? Bartók? Billy Childs?

And yet, thanks to the one-two punch of competing priorities and the pandemic, the Isidore String Quartet almost didn't happen.

While most college students get together for binges of video games or Netflix, conservatory students in New York City gather in apartments around town for sight-reading parties. These are places for making friends and networking, but most of all a welcome relief from hours spent alone in the practice room.

It was at one of these reading parties where the Isidores first met in the fall of 2018. Three of the four musicians—cellist McClendon and violinists Phoenix Avalon and Adrian Steele—had just started their undergraduate degrees at Juilliard. Violist Moore, then a sophomore at Manhattan School of Music, spent much of that school year commuting the 60 blocks downtown to play with his future quartet-mates.

Enticed by the prospect of an official ensemble (and fed up with the subway), Moore transferred to Juilliard the next fall. The Isidore String Quartet, named for legendary Juilliard String Quartet violinist Isidore Cohen, was technically formed that semester, but conservatory life, with its studio classes and orchestra rehearsals, often pulled the members in different directions. And then, the pandemic hit. The group couldn't meet at all until the summer of 2020. When they were able to reconvene (masked and distanced), whatever chemistry they'd felt had fizzled. The Isidore Quartet was over before it had begun.

As people got vaccinated in spring 2021, the underground sight-reading scene surged back to life. Eight months post-breakup, the four Isidores found themselves back where they'd started: at a party in a colleague's apartment, waiting their turn to play. When I talked recently with the quartet over cookies and coffee at their rehearsal space on Manhattan's Upper West Side, none of the four musicians could quite articulate what clicked at the Mendelssohn and Schumann sight-reading session that ensued at that party in 2021. A year of conservatory, McClendon pointed out, can fundamentally change the way players conceive music on many levels. While those changes can often pull musicians apart, it felt to the Isidores as if the four of them had evolved in perfect lockstep.

The group planned an in-person reunion session that summer at Kneisel Hall, the annual festival in Blue Hill, Maine where several Juilliard faculty members teach between school years. The Isidores mark that four-week term, spent rehearsing Bartók's First String Quartet, as their official formation. By August, several faculty members saw promise in the young quartet. "One of the things I noticed right away is the incredible facility they have together, matching strokes and vibrato," said Laurie Smukler,

the Juilliard professor who also serves as artistic director of Kneisel Hall. She had been working with the quartet since their first incarnation, and even then, she saw the spark: "Together, they are electric."

With encouragement from mentors and friends, the renewed Isidore Quartet returned to Juilliard. Steele and Avalon were seniors, Moore was a first-year master's student, and McClendon, having taken some pandemic time off, was a junior, but all four considered the ensemble their top priority. Between other obligations—Avalon was preparing for Poland's International Henryk Wieniawski Violin Competition, Moore and McClendon subbed frequently with the New York Philharmonic—they began to shed Haydn and Beethoven with legendary former Juilliard String Quartet cellist (and Kneisel Hall coach) Joel Krosnick, steadily building their sensibility as an ensemble. "Each of the members is an individually brilliant instrumentalist, with a unique sound and a musical sense of his own," said Krosnick. "In addition, each of them is a sensitively aware chamber musician, intimately and deeply loving of the magically shifting voices and instrumental registers in the great string quartet music we play."

The Isidores applied to programs for summer 2022, landing a spot at the Ravinia Festival's Steans Music Institute in Highland Park, Illinois. Originally, the quartet assumed they would use their time at the Institute to continue refining their ensemble philosophy and sound. But after their Banff acceptance—a shock, and an early stamp of approval—they kicked into overdrive. With almost three hours of repertoire to learn and polish before the competition's late-August start, Ravinia would be five weeks of full-on cramming.

The Isidores arrived in Illinois in June. The festival provided the quartet a house adjacent to campus, three meals a day, and a star roster of coaches. "You know those reality TV shows where they lock a bunch of people in a house together?" Avalon asked. "This was like if the *Too Hot to Handle* villa was in the suburbs of Chicago."

"With notes of *Hoarders*," Moore added. "And prison."

For the first time, the Isidores ate, slept, and lived as a quartet. The regimen was strict. Alarm clocks set between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M. A quick warm-up, a couple hours of rehearsal. After lunch, a coaching, or sometimes two. Another few hours of rehearsal. Only after they completed four to five hours as an ensemble would the members break off for individual practice sessions, sometimes as long as three additional hours—Avalon was still preparing for the Wieniawski competition.

None of them saw much of the sun. "I'd walk outside some-

times and the light would hurt,” Avalon said. The Isidore house was just a stone’s throw from Ravinia’s breezy open-air pavilion, where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s summer residency alternates with sold-out performances by marquee names. Sound checks for Béla Fleck or Trombone Shorty would accompany the quartet’s morning scales—dystopian reminders of the fun they weren’t having.

That Ravinia summer tested the Isidores’ emotional health. Aside from the toll of living together (roommate drama springs eternal, even among close friends), the quartet stared down more repertoire than any of the members had learned in such a concentrated time. And, most dauntingly, the quartet had to construct their signature sound, the very thing that makes an ensemble special. Most quartets happen upon their *je-ne-sais-quoi* after years of trial and error, but with such a tight deadline, the Isidores had to make decisions. How would Beethoven sound in their idiom? Brahms? Bartók? Billy Childs?

Playing together, and talking about how to play together, with a make-or-break opportunity dead ahead—well, it was a lot. Tempers flared, frustrations mounted, moods plummeted. As they felt their communication straining, the Isidores sought mentorship from William Fedkenheuer, the Miró Quartet violinist who has also worked as a career consultant to budding classical musicians for more than 20 years. What Fedkenheuer teaches is sometimes called conflict resolution, but he doesn’t serve as a mediator or a judge. Rather, he approaches ensemble dynamics from a standpoint of emotional freedom. In his philosophy, the key to open communication lies in mutual support and understanding.

Quartets present a murky line between individual and ensemble, says Fedkenheuer. “You’re having to explore personal sides of yourself, but also contribute to a team. And you have to be open, but at the same time, you have to ask to be a leader. There’s a lot that gets mixed up in those dynamics.” Fedkenheuer helped the quartet find little tricks to pull each other away from their negative, self-flagellating mindsets. For Moore, that might be a silly, over-the-top ornament. (“Apoggiaturas solve all the world’s

problems,” he said semi-jokingly.) For bird enthusiast McClendon, a look out the window and some ornithology talk. And nothing cheered Avalon up quite like hearing Steele make a mistake—an event so rare that it’s comical, the quartet agreed.

The five weeks at Ravinia were intense, but the group survived. After a quick pit stop for instrument swaps and tune-ups—

Moore and McClendon both switched their usual instruments for 18th-century antiques from Tarisio’s auction house—the four retreated to Santa Fe (Avalon’s hometown) for ten days of hiking, hot tubs, and house concerts around town. The pressure-cooker summer had been necessary, but they knew that wasn’t the way they wanted to live and make music.

The quartet considers those Santa Fe living-room soirées some of the best performances they’ve given to date. At house concerts, the audience always marvels at

the novelty of fully *experiencing* a quartet. How they communicate. How they breathe. How the glances and subliminal body movements contribute to the music. When the crowd is so physically close, the performers can descend from their pedestal. At one house in Santa Fe, Moore blessed a sneezy crowd member without dropping an eighth note from his Haydn. “There’s an extra variety pack of communication unlocked onstage, and we’re inviting the audience into that space,” said Moore. “We’re all just having a conversation. It’s not even reinventing the wheel. It’s just letting the wheel roll.”

The Banff competition has five rounds, but only one elimination point, giving every quartet the opportunity to show both breadth and depth. Over the first six days, the jury heard the Isidores through four rounds. The quartet paired a sunny early Haydn with the second quartet of composer and jazz pianist Billy Childs (“Awakening”), a jagged, angular work that the Isidores count among their favorites. A brooding, fiery version of Brahms’s second string quartet (in A minor, op. 51) followed. After that, a 10-minute commissioned



The Isidore String Quartet onstage at the 2022 Banff International String Quartet Competition.

piece, *The Disappearance of Lisa Gherardini*, inspired by a historical heist of the *Mona Lisa* by Canadian-Sri Lankan composer Dinuk Wijeratne, that was compulsory for all the competing quartets. Finally, the Isidores performed a recital of their own devising: a *contrapunctus* of Bach's *Art of the Fugue* followed by Bartók's first quartet (in A minor, op. 7), the piece that had reunited them at Kneisel Hall in 2021.

BISQC is a harrowing week, and that's by design, said Director Barry Shiffman: "There's no place to hide at Banff." In the past, he'd seen several quartets whose medal prospects were foiled by a single piece. The Banff winners, he said, should be prepared to excel at any repertoire, at any time. As if the stress of competition wasn't enough, BISQC is also a spectator sport. Fedkenheuer warned the Isidores that the Banff audience was manically invested, often to a fault. Indeed, at 8:00 A.M. on day one, a couple of spectators interrupted McClendon and Avalon's coffee and eggs with intricate questions about vibrato in Haydn.

"It's such a complex relationship with that place," said Moore. "I just remember being so nervous all the time. But it's also so beautiful, and so welcoming to string quartets." Unlike the cutthroat, judgmental competitions the Isidores had played in as soloists, BISQC felt like a joyful celebration. Fellow competitors wrapped them in hugs and showered them with hearty congratulations after performances. At meals, musicians talked for hours on end, and many of the competitors gathered for a warm, friendly, boozy hang on the first evening (sans Avalon, who went to bed at 8:00 P.M. to combat jitters).

Shiffman said that BISQC purposely juxtaposes its gauntlet with a warm, nurturing environment. They even hire a resident mentor, a non-jury faculty member on hand solely as a resource. For the 2022 competition, Brentano Quartet first violinist Mark Steinberg filled that role, which ranges from listening ear to hiking partner to shoulder on which to cry. At risk of cliché, just being at Banff is an accomplishment—and to an extent, everyone wins. Each quartet is guaranteed \$5,000 CAD of prize money, and many groups that didn't even make the finals when they competed are now renowned chamber music forces. These include the double-GRAMMY-winning Attacca Quartet, an ensemble of choice for Pulitzer-winning composer Caroline Shaw; the Cavani String Quartet, whose pedagogical "live, breathe, and die" approach influenced the Isidores' philosophy; and the Calidore String Quartet, now in residence at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. (Their cellist, Estelle Choi, was on the 2022 jury; McClendon said his heart skipped a beat when he saw her eyes locked on his left hand during one of the early rounds.)

The Banff elimination point comes on the competition's second-to-last night, less than twenty-four hours before the jury

crowns a winner. The Isidores remember deliberations lasting well past midnight. But when Barry Shiffman strode into the common area where the quartets nervously waited, he read the three finalists' names swiftly and unceremoniously. The Isidores would advance to play Beethoven in the final round.

Every Banff affiliate I spoke to mentioned the quartet's vivacious first-round rendition of an early C major quartet by Haydn (op. 20, no. 2), the rare Haydn quartet that distributes the difficulty somewhat evenly between all four voices. The Isidores' version sparkles with cheeky wit, highlighting the humor inherent in Haydn's voice. Said Steele: "Haydn just really liked to screw around."

After Shiffman's announcement, the other two advancing quartets, Oslo's Opus13 and Boston's Balourdet, retreated to practice, despite the late hour. The Isidores went to bed. The final was barely half a day away, at 2:00 P.M. the next day, and they suspected a good night's sleep would help them more than another frantic run-through. By pure coincidence, the three quartets would play three of Beethoven's monumental late opuses back-to-back: Opus 13's 130 (with the original *Grosse Fuge* ending), Balourdet's 131, and finally, the Isidores' 132.

As the Isidores' final A major chords dissipated, the audience leapt to their feet, both for the quartet's performance and for the competition as a whole. That evening, the Isidore Quartet would find out that they'd won the first prize: a package of cash, paid residencies, concert tours, and a recording valued at more than half a million Canadian dollars. In a recent email, jury member and violinist James Ehnes told me that the Isidores "play with great technical assurance and attention to detail, but also with creativity, elegance, and dignity."

Not bad for a year's work.

When the Isidores won Banff in 2022, their ages ranged from twenty-one (Steele) to twenty-three (Moore). In most peoples' lives, that's when "adulthood" begins: finding first apartments, figuring out personal finances, perhaps settling into serious relationships. The Isidores aren't exempt from those milestones, but their early twenties have also been—and will continue to be—a period of tremendous professional and musical growth. And it's more stressful because they know the world is watching.

"Any aura around life in our early twenties is very quickly going away," said McClendon. Even in the Isidores' everyday lives, work has to take priority. Balance is hard to find. The four players miss the spontaneous, irresponsible fun that everyone associates with the years right after college graduation. They're also learning about the business side of quartet life. Touring.

Teaching. Spending so much time together. And making tradeoffs: Avalon, Steele, and Moore dropped out of their Juilliard master's programs as the quartet became a full-time job. (McClendon will graduate with his bachelor's this May.)

Most twenty-somethings turn to parents or friends for advice, but the Isidores say most of the people in their lives can't relate to their niche struggles. "I can talk to my mom until I'm blue in the face. She won't understand," Moore said. McClendon narrowed their field of confidants even further: "Even if you joined a quartet when you were thirty-five, it's a different ballgame." When they need someone to talk to, they lean on each other.

Moore said that people both within and outside of the music world tend to fetishize quartet life as an idyllic utopia. "The good moments are," he agreed. But with the pressure of intense self-scrutiny, a flood of opportunities, and planning their career trajectories ten, fifteen, twenty years out, small frustrations were building up between the Isidores. Those frustrations came to a head in January of this year, the quartet told me. They didn't want to share details, but as Moore painted the broad strokes, the room turned from cheerful to poignantly glum. In the end, Fedkenheuer advised the Isidores to take a couple of weeks off from each other, their first much-needed break since re-forming in 2021.

When I talked to the quartet in mid-March, they said they were still working through the after-effects of that fallout. They're figuring out how to express their negative emotions honestly rather than bottling them up and trudging forward. Slowly but surely, they're building in space for imperfection. Giving themselves permission to cut an unproductive rehearsal short; to sight-read something, just for fun; to spend time away from each other. Balancing their relationship as each other's harshest critics, closest confidants, professional colleagues, and dearest friends. "If you can't be vulnerable without the instruments," Avalon asks, "then how can you connect to each other musically onstage?"

By the time BISQC crowned the Isidores in September 2022, most major presenters were gearing up to start their '22-'23 seasons, their schedules already set. For the young quartet, that was a relief—they thought they'd have time to regroup before they started touring full-time.

But the next month, St. Lawrence String Quartet first violinist Geoff Nuttall tragically died of cancer. The Isidores were tapped as replacements. After a quick, informal hometown launch at New York City's Museum of Arts and Design, the quartet began December 2022 on the road with their first of several short tours. A more official NYC debut followed in March, with Britten, Bach, and premieres at The New School.

"This is a group that doesn't have any kind of identity crisis," said Kristen Linfante, executive director of Chamber Music Pittsburgh. (The Isidores took over a February Pittsburgh date from St. Lawrence). "They're not trying to be like anyone else or follow in anyone else's footsteps. They are unique in every possible way, and their sheer joy for what they do couldn't be more apparent."

The quartet says touring life has advantages—they'll see much of the world before they turn thirty. As part of their BISQC prize package, they'll play concerts at more than fifty venues around Europe and North America. Their first Banff-sponsored trip was this past April, performing Haydn at the composer's old Esterházy post in Eisenstadt, Austria. And now, with their \$25,000 Avery Fisher Career Grant, the quartet is ready to present their artistry on their own terms, outside of any other presenter's paradigm. They're conceiving an interdisciplinary event, the Playground Festival, to be held in a Brooklyn warehouse in early 2024. The early plans include music-food pairings; a debut of the Isidores' night-themed program, performed in the dark with lighting design; collaborations with visual artists to create physical "playgrounds"; and, of course, a wrap-night sight-reading party.

Jeremy Geffen, executive and artistic director of UC Berkeley's Cal Performances, remarked that the Isidores made an instant impression when the Avery Fisher Career Grant board began their considerations. (There is no application or audition for the grant; winners don't find out that they are under consideration until they've already won.) "Even as they develop their repertoire, which is already substantial, they have already developed hallmarks of balance, tonal variety, virtuosity, and an infectious joy of discovery," he said.

Most importantly, the Isidore Quartet wants to show honest versions of themselves onstage, through both their programming and their performance personas. "We want to root ourselves in our authenticity," said Moore. "We're trying to understand life through the medium of the quartet." Avalon added, "We're just trying to connect to people." But some things never change, he says. "We're still going to drive ourselves crazy trying to get our thirds in tune."

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