

# Starling String Quartet

## journeys to Qatar for exchange of musical culture

by HILARY GAMBLE (BA'10, MM'12, AMS'13)



**As a member of the Starling Honors String Quartet,**

I was invited to perform with the group during Spring Break 2012 at the Carnegie Mellon Qatar campus. I had traveled extensively as a musician before, but had never been to the Middle East. I was excited to experience a new culture along with my fellow quartet members Sonia Shklarov, violin; AiWen Thian, viola; and Marlene Ballena, cello. Joining us was interim head of the School of Music (now current head) Denis Colwell and his wife Melanie. I envisioned our visit to Qatar as a cultural exchange: we would introduce our Qatari audience to the great literature for string quartet, and in the process would learn about their very different way of life.

↑ IMAGE: GOOGLE MAPS

Our first performance venue was at Carnegie Mellon in Qatar in Education City, a large educational complex containing branches of several high-level universities. We gave concerts for students and faculty there. It was an inspiring place to perform, first of all because of its stunning and futuristic architecture, and more importantly because of the intensive academic atmosphere. It was fascinating to witness the same rigorous academic standards of the Pittsburgh campus at work halfway around the world. Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar Dean Ilker Baybars was very gracious as host, illuminating for us the education process in Doha.

The group also had the opportunity to play in other venues in Doha, including the Four Seasons Hotel. This performance was particularly memorable, as we later found out that our small audience included Kofi Anan, former Secretary General of the United Nations.

Another highlight of the trip was performing and interacting with students at a few local schools. This gave us an opportunity

to connect with a completely fresh audience: some of the young students had never heard a string quartet before, and it was a great thrill to introduce them to the intricacies of the violin, my instrument. We played Dvořák and Shostakovich, two composers whose backgrounds differ greatly from those of most Qataris, to say the least. It was a joy to introduce young children to these two musical giants.

During our time off we enjoyed seeing the sights of the city. One of my favorite moments of the trip was our visit to the Souk Waqif, or local bazaar. We gained a view into the everyday lives of Qataris, bargaining for goods at the Souk, sampling delicious foods, and listening to popular Middle Eastern music. I haggled with a vendor for a lovely carved wooden chess set which I brought back with me as a memento of the trip.

I am so thankful to be at a place like Carnegie Mellon where experiences such as this concert tour are possible. As a musician and artist, I think it is vital to have an understanding of what is going on in the world at large, as well as maintaining an active curiosity about cultures and customs different from my own. This trip gave me the opportunity to hone my craft through performances, and was integral to my education as a musician and as a socially-conscious individual.

Hilary Gamble is studying to receive her Advanced Music Studies Certificate in the viola studio of David Harding.

Watch:

Starling Quartet at the Four Seasons, Doha, Qatar:  
<http://youtu.be/Nc1U0IFoPnA>