

FIVE MINUTES WITH PAUL WATKINS: CHECKING OUT THE GREAT LAKES CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL

By Laurence Vittes
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Since Welsh cellist [Paul Watkins](#) joined the previously all-American Emerson Quartet two years ago, the [Emerson Quartet 2.0](#) (my name) has played maiden tours to great acclaim, and settled down to its international routine of concerts, festivals and residencies, plus appearances at art galleries, private homes and other lucrative venues on the alternative classical music circuit.

Watkins has meanwhile caught the Yankee entrepreneurial spirit and become Artistic Director of the [Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival](#) which runs June 13-28 in the Detroit metro area. The Festival theme is America, **New Beginnings: Making Music in America**, and encompasses a generous blend of intriguing new and comforting old. The old gives players and audiences to hear a lot of music they may love and know well but rarely enjoy together live—as on opening night when the Emerson Quartet in various configurations, including Watkins at the piano, will play Martinu, Dvorak, Bloch and Barber.

The healthy scattering of new music will include first performances of two commissions: the [Calidore String Quartet](#) will premiere Mark Grey's new work, and eighth blackbird will debut **Hand Eye**, a 60-minute, amplified program without intermission, by the Brooklyn-based composer consortium Sleeping Giant promised to be "a mind-bending, wired program of works spanning vast sonic worlds." The last concert will feature Grey, Radiohead and Watkins joining Calidore for Schubert's Quintet D. 956.

Laurence Vittes What has life been like since you made the change to the Emerson Quartet?

Paul Watkins It has been amazing. In the last two years, I have played nearly all of the Beethoven quartets for the first time, as well as masterpieces by Bartok, Mendelssohn, Shostakovich, Mozart, Haydn, Britten, Berg and many others. I have never studied and performed such an enormous concentration of repertoire in my life, and it has been and continues to be a thrill.

Laurence Vittes Is being the Artistic Director of a Chamber Music Festival as much fun as it sounds?

Paul Watkins Being Artistic Director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival is a mixture of hard work and brainstorming, which our Executive Director, Maury Okun, manages to make fun. I don't know how he does this, but I'm grateful that he's experienced and unflappable because I am neither!



Laurence Vittes Which comes first when planning the programming, the artists or the repertoire?

Paul Watkins That's tricky to answer. I like to find an overarching theme for each Festival, and match artists to the repertoire I have in mind, but it's also the case that certain artists are "must haves" and can influence the choice of repertoire themselves.

Laurence Vittes What is there about **Hand Eye** that might be of interest to string players?

Paul Watkins I haven't seen the score, but I know the work of the six individual composers [Andrew Norman, Ted Hearne, Chris Cerrone, Timo Andres, Jacob Cooper and Rob Honstein] and can say that they all write for strings with great sympathy. Many of them are interested in extended techniques and explore the colors that can be achieved by extremes of bowing to great effect.

Laurence Vittes What role are alternative venues playing in your touring engagements?

Paul Watkins The Emerson Quartet plays mainly in traditional concert venues, but we have also performed in art galleries with enjoyment and success. As an individual, I am always interested to explore unusual venues. In the past, I have played in hospitals, prisons, pubs and a military aircraft hangar!

Laurence Vittes What will all the violinists, including Eugene Drucker, Jaime Laredo, Sharon Robinson, and Stephanie Gonley, be doing?

Paul Watkins Eugene Drucker will be performing one of his own compositions, a suite for violin and piano, and will also be reading from and discussing his novel, [The Savior](#). Jaime Laredo and Stephanie Gonley will be performing the Bach Double Concerto, and Stephanie will join Jaime, his wife, Sharon Robinson and pianist Anton Nel in the Brahms G minor piano quartet, where Stephanie will play viola. They will also be performing a number of other pieces in different Festival venues, and coaching ensembles from the Festival's Shouse Institute.

Laurence Vittes What constitutes the Detroit metro area?

Paul Watkins The Festival's primary stages are in Oakland County, and then provides concerts throughout southeastern Michigan. Presentations stretch from city to suburbs, from Grosse Pointe to Ann Arbor, and include presentations in Windsor, Ontario, in Canada.