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## Winds of change

Germany's Quartet New Generation breathes new life into the recorder

By Bryant Manning

"There aren't many people here in Germany who know about the recorder," says Susanne Fröhlich, who seems to be uttering less a local observation than a universal truth. You'd find few Americans who don't associate the instrument with elementary-school music class and three-note jams like "Hot Cross Buns."

Calling us from a small town in northern Germany, Fröhlich—who makes up one quarter of the Austro-German recorder collective Quartet New Generation—is all too familiar with having to set the record straight about her unique ensemble. But the all-female group challenges any stubborn stigmas simply by stepping onstage. Worlds away from the small, plastic tubes children play, QNG's recorders are sophisticated wooden instruments that range from handheld-size to human-size: "The contrabass recorder can get up to 6½ feet tall," Fröhlich says. Unlike a string quartet and other fixed ensembles, QNG always experiments with a variety of recorders, of lower and higher timbres, to create as many sound combinations as possible.

Listening to their music does make one wonder why all-recorder ensembles remain a relatively rare phenomenon. A cousin to the flute, the recorder lacks the former's bright, metallic, often piercing sheen. The wooden instruments can produce a variety of sounds, from heaving breaths to quietly chugging locomotives; Anne Midgette of *The New York Times* wrote that certain intonations sound like "lost puppies." When all four of QNG's instruments converge, as in Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, blissful harmony ensues.

Yet old wigs like Bach and the early composer John Dowland, both of whom will be on Wednesday 12's program, weren't initially welcome components of this group's repertoire. "Our main goal was to only play contemporary music," Fröhlich says. "Then we wanted to enter a competition and we had to play earlier music. We soon realized how well the connection works between early and contemporary music, and this became very important to us."

Fröhlich and her ensemble mates feel obligated to explain their fierce loyalty to more modern pieces. "We always prepare the audiences by talking to them, showing how contemporary works are prepared by earlier works," Fröhlich says. In fact, some newer pieces the four have performed, like Chiel Meijering's "Cyber Girls Go Extreme" (2003), require interpretive dance steps (and a good deal of coordination) alongside a poppy electro-pulse. Other works, like K. Serocki's "Arrangements," transform the recorder into a percussive tool.

The QNG brought its act across the Atlantic after running into one of Chicago's proudest new-music gangs: eighth blackbird. During a competition in Krakow, Poland, the four women brushed shoulders with the ensemble's members, who recommended they enter the Concert Artists Guild International Competition in the U.S. In 2004, QNG heeded that advice and took first prize, forging a pipeline for numerous American appearances.

One of those appearances was a 2006 Chicago performance whose audience included composer Simon Fink. "He was really inspired by our instruments and the concert we gave, so he wanted to compose something for us," Fröhlich says of what will be Fink's world premiere this week, *The Kick Galvanic* (*Straight to My Lover's Heart*).

All about 30 years old, the QNG women have been together since 1998. Such longevity often breeds complacency, but the QNG members are itching to reinvent themselves. When asked where she sees the quartet in ten years, Fröhlich turns away from the phone to ask her colleagues. "Our dream is to have our own big show programs and to work more with media," she emphatically declares. "And we want to work more with electronics, and to have our own choreographer, too." Even the group's exclusive dedication to therecorder may change: "We'd also love to merge with other instruments, like strings and percussion."