



# The Saints March In: A Conversation with Members of the Saint Michael Trio

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In *Fanfare* 33:5, I reviewed a new entry from an unlikely source, a recently formed piano trio composed of three outstanding musicians whose professional careers by day were unrelated to music. Leading double lives are Daniel Cher, violin, who by day is a medical doctor leading clinical trials for Chestnut Medical Technologies; Michel Flexer, cello, who by day is a software engineer most recently employed by Gain Technologies and Siebel Systems; and Russell Hancock, piano, who by day is president and CEO of Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network. The three men joined in 2007 to form a new piano trio ensemble, but not before each had received extensive training on his respective instrument and had acquired a good deal of professional performing experience.

I was so impressed by their debut album and so intrigued by the idea that three part-time musicians could form an ensemble of such high caliber as to be on a par with many celebrated name ensembles that I asked if they would consent to an interview. The answer was affirmative, and they were able to interrupt their very busy schedules to grant me this audience.

The first question that comes to my mind to ask was how did the three of them hook up? What were the circumstances that brought them together? Hancock is first to jump in.

“When they make *Saint Michael Trio: The Movie*, they’ll have to come up with some kind of ‘meet cute’ because the actual story is pretty boring! But here’s all there is to it: A mutual friend introduced me to Danny and we found instant rapport—musically and otherwise. So then I said to Danny, ‘Now all we need is a cello,’ and he said, ‘Well, I’ve got the guy.’”

“That’s right,” Cher chimes in, “Michel and I had known each other since college, high school even. We played in a string trio in the early 1980s. We’re also part of a string quartet.”

Flexer adds, “Our quartet is called the Beet Quartet because we play lots of Beethoven, and because we once played at the outdoor farmer’s market in Palo Alto.”

It takes me a second to get the joke, but Hancock doesn’t miss a beat. “I’m afraid there’s nothing touching or gripping about how we came together, but I will tell you this: I had been looking for these guys my entire life. And when we finally met up there was instant recognition.”

I ask for an explanation of how they came to name the ensemble the Saint Michael Trio, and whether it has any special significance.

“Uh-oh,” Hancock interjects, “The screenplay is going to have to improve on this part of our story too, because there’s basically no story. I live on Saint Michael Drive in Palo Alto.”

“And here I thought it was named after me,” Flexer says, feigning hurt feelings.

But Cher is having none of it. “Well, Saint Michael is the patron saint of physicians, so I think it was named for me! Maybe we can say he’s the patron saint of clinical trials ... or maybe not. But actually, our earliest concerts were at Rusty’s house. So it made perfect sense to call ourselves the Saint Michael Trio.”

Hancock is prompted to take a short stroll down memory lane. “Ah, yes. Those early concerts were terrific. In fact, we still do them. My house can seat 40 people comfortably—which is a wonderful size for chamber music—so we send out an e-mail to all the people in our database and tell them the first 40 responders get seated. First come, first served. And the concerts sell out within hours! Anyway, we called these ‘Saint Michael Concerts’ and we became the Saint Michael Trio.”

As an amateur player myself, I know how much pleasure and food for the soul there is in playing chamber music together with a group of friends, especially after a long, hard day at the office. As a career computer programmer for more than 25 years, I lived for those evenings playing violin in an amateur string quartet. You’ve heard of the Végh Quartet? Well, we called ourselves “The Oy Vey Quartet.” And we too would perform at the occasional garden party, social gathering, and convalescent home, where the walker- and wheelchair-bound audience couldn’t escape but mercifully dozed off during our mixed programs of Haydn, Schubert, and Joplin. But never in a million years would we have entertained the idea of going pro. We simply weren’t good enough, plus we each had our own jobs that paid the rent and put food on the table. I ask how can the members of the Saint Michael Trio step off a plane returning from a conference in Beijing and proceed directly to the hall where they’re playing a concert? The larger question is how do they lead double lives and successfully balance the priorities? And how do they find the time for intensive practice sessions and rehearsals when they’re preparing for a performance?

Hancock is first to address the question. “All three of us made fateful life choices when we were in college to invest ourselves in careers outside of music. But in my case, at least, it wasn’t a decision to depart the industry. It was a decision to do something in addition to my musical life. I’ve always been committed to a performing career, to performing at the highest standards and to being judged as a professional. But I had a sense in college—now confirmed—that music would be more satisfying if it wasn’t the only thing. So I added in my second passion, politics and public policy, and isn’t life grand? You don’t actually have to choose! You can do both. And you can do both well. It just takes a high metabolism, is all.”

Next to field the question is Cher. “In college I had the application to Juilliard in my hands. Simultaneously, I was taking a cell biology course, and I found it fascinating and was hooked. Nonetheless, I continued to practice violin, play in local groups, and give concerts as much as I could. Not having to pursue music on a professional basis meant I could practice what I wanted and play when I wanted. When concerts approach, the Saint Michael Trio definitely gets together for intensive rehearsal. This is usually after the kids have either finished homework or (in Michel’s case) gone to sleep. I have sympathy for Rusty’s kids, because we usually practice at his house. Practice definitely takes its toll on my family, but I simply have to continue to play.”

“We find the time,” Flexer says, “because we make it a priority. Sometimes, it’s not the easy or popular decision, with two young girls at home, but as Rusty often says, we do this because we have to. I think if I had chosen a professional career as a musician, most of the enjoyment of the music would have been removed.”

“If you’re genuinely curious about the logistics,” Hancock adds, “well, my practicing is accomplished early in the morning and late at night. I practice intensively before I go to the office every morning, and I rise at a pretty ghastly hour to do it. In fact, I have this wonderful understanding with the good folks at Sherman Clay in Santa

Clara, the piano distributor that happens to be located on my way to the office. They let me come into the store before it opens and have my way with any of the pianos! And I play a different piano every day, so I don't get attached to any single keyboard. Because remember, unlike Danny and Michel, I have to play on an unknown instrument every time we perform, and you never know what you're going to get! So I love the folks at Sherman Clay for letting me work my way through their showroom. The point to your actual question is that I practice in the morning, before I do anything else. In other words, the music comes first, and after the music is done then the rest of the day begins."

Do any of them anticipate any conflicts down the road between music and their respective careers? Do they see a day at some point in the future where the increasing burdens of public appearances, concertizing, and recording may lead to a crisis of conscience where they will have to make some hard choices between the two? "My job is fairly flexible," Cher tells me, "so when I'm in town there's time for performance. However, we carefully balance the number of performances with family life, so that we don't get overwhelmed."

Flexer doesn't see trouble happening. "I'm very happy with both aspects of my life, and don't foresee the need to change them.

Hancock is a bit more circumspect. "You know, you should never say 'never.' But we're not doing this because we're hoping to bag our day jobs someday. We're equally passionate about our 'secular' careers. We actually want to do both. Musically, it means that we won't spend eight months out of the year on tour, and we're OK with that. We're plotting a trajectory that has us recording and performing extensively from our institutional base (Menlo College) and hitting the road on select weekends throughout the year. The good news about all three of us is that we hold senior positions or principal positions in our 'other' lives, so we have the liberty to schedule our concert commitments fairly flexibly. The other good news is that the modern world is completely wired (or wireless), so that even if we're on the road we're still connected. Last weekend is a perfect example; we performed a noon recital at Brigham Young University, an evening concert at the Assembly Hall in downtown Salt Lake, and caught a plane back first thing in the morning. We were connected to our offices the whole time. We've all three got matching iPhones, and we're constantly texting and sending e-mail back to our offices."

"Yep," Flexer adds, "we're iPhone fanatics. In fact, writing iPhone apps is another bad habit of mine. I even roped these guys into recording the soundtrack for an application. Check it out! It's called 'Wheels on the Bus' and you can download it at the iTunes app store. When you do, you'll hear the Saint Michael Trio providing the music."

"And while you're at the iTunes store," Cher gets in a plug, "be sure to download MP3s of the Saint Michael Trio's Debut album!"

I was particularly struck by the gorgeous tone of the string instruments on that recording. I ask whether the instruments are by contemporary makers (I know there are one or two very reliable ones in the Bay Area) or they are older Italian instruments with, of course, modern fittings.

Flexer tells me that "both of our instruments were made by the same maker in France, Frank Ravatin, who lives in Vannes. My cello was made in 2005, and Danny's violin was made just a few months ago. Mr. Ravatin makes beautiful and amazing instruments."

Cher nods in assent. "Agreed, I love my new violin."

It's not Hancock's turn, but he's eager to add that "the varnish is still tacky on Danny's violin—that's how new it is. And it's a magnificent instrument, like Michel's cello. We were there when Danny picked up his new fiddle for the first time. It was a special moment. It actually arrived from France via San Francisco International Airport, at the cargo terminal. It came in a box the size of a casket! Danny had to take it to his medical lab and find some special instruments to help him open it!"

Obviously, the first album was more or less a sampler drawn from works in the ensemble's current repertoire. Are there plans in the works for future recordings, and if so, are there particular areas of the piano trio literature they're interested in exploring?

"There is no area of the trio literature that doesn't interest us," Hancock says, "and we're going to attend to it all! But since our first recording was heavy on the Classical-Romantic literature, our next album will be a complete contrast. It's going to feature lighter fare, and all of it contemporary: the fusion jazz of Claude Bolling, a couple of commissions, and maybe Paul Schoenfield's *Café Music*. We're hoping for a late 2010 or early 2011 release."

Cher picks up the thread of our conversation. "One of our goals is to expand the repertoire available to classical musicians. Playing the music of dead Europeans is great and we love it, but we also want to feature the work of living composers. This is why we put most of our earnings toward commissions, so that we can be a force for the renewal and regeneration of this genre."

"Yes," Flexer adds, "it's also a way we can bring a wider audience to chamber music, by playing lots of variety. For this reason, we select great works from outside the classical literature and sometimes even arrange pieces for piano trio. Rusty's arranged a great version of a Stevie Wonder tune recently, and Danny's arranged some Gershwin and some tangos. One of our trademarks is doing everything—classics and contemporary—in the same concert."