

New Century Saxophone Quartet

Biography

Michael Stephenson, soprano saxophone
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The first ensemble of its kind ever to win First Prize of the Concert Artists Guild Competition, the NEW CENTURY SAXOPHONE QUARTET is a pioneering and versatile group winning new-found enthusiasm for the saxophone quartet and its diverse repertory, ranging from the complete *The Art of the Fugue* of J.S. Bach to innovative contemporary works. The recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Arts Council, Chamber Music America, and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, New Century has been heard in major concert venues in Los Angeles, New York, and Amsterdam; on radio and television in the United States, Europe, and Central America; in recordings for the Channel Classics label; and in unusual performance settings, ranging from two Command Performances for President Clinton in the White House to a concerto performance with The United States Navy Band, Washington. The Quartet has commissioned numerous works, most notably a concerto from Peter Schickele, and has recorded extensively for Channel Classics Records.

New Century's 1993 New York debut at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall earned the group praise for their "virtuosic display of dexterity and keen ensemble work," in which the "players handled all the music with panache" (*New York Post*). Upon becoming the first saxophone quartet presented at the Ambassador Auditorium in Los Angeles, the *Los Angeles Times* heralded the Quartet's West Coast debut: "Tackling brave new territory in the conservative-leaning realm of classical music takes a unique blend of conviction, refined talent, and a bit of damn-the-torpedoes ambition. Those qualities are amply in evidence with the New Century Saxophone Quartet, not to mention a finely honed musicality deserving wider acceptance." Other engagements include Chicago's Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Atlanta's Spivey Concert Hall, Boston's Symphony Hall and Gardner Museum, New York's Merkin Concert Hall and the Kosciuszko Foundation Townhouse, Washington, D.C.'s Strathmore Hall, and the Juneau Jazz and Classics Festival in Alaska.

New Century premiered Peter Schickele's *New Century Suite* with the North Carolina Symphony in September 2000. Subsequent performances include the Canton, Western Piedmont, Waterbury, Billings, Bakersfield, and Winston-Salem Symphonies. Over the past two decades, New Century has been responsible for a significant broadening of the repertory of saxophone quartet. The quartet premiered David Lang's *Revolutionary Etudes* at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival in June 2006. In January 2002, the Quartet premiered a new work from the well-known jazz saxophonist Bob Mintzer, commissioned by Chamber Music America. A commission from Lenny Pickett, band leader and lead saxophonist of the Saturday Night Live Band, had its premiere in 1997 at Merkin Concert Hall in New York. The Quartet premiered a concerto with wind ensemble from Benjamin Boone in Carnegie Hall in 1999. Other premieres include works of Ben Johnston, Barbara Kolb, David Ott, Sherwood Shaffer, John FitzRogers, Arthur Frackenpohl, Ken Valitsky, and Jacob ter Veldhuis. Most recently, New Century co-commissioned and premiered, with the Amstel Saxophone Quartet, Michael Torke's "May" and "June" (2010), companion pieces to that composer's earlier work, "July" (1995). Upcoming premieres include a new work from Robert Dick.

Since the 2003-2004 season, the quartet has frequently performed Bach's *The Art of Fugue* in synchronization with computer-generated animations created by the New York-based design and animation house, Misha Films. These performances include Purdue University Convocations in Indiana, Premiere Performances at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, a collaboration of North Carolina State University and the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild in North Carolina, Whittier College in Los Angeles, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the University at Buffalo, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, the Detroit Institute of Art, and at the Chamber Music America National Conference.

The Quartet's newest recording, "Weekend Travelers," was released by Alanna Records in 2014 and comprises a range of works inspired by and drawn from folk music from around the world. "On Track" is a second album of works written for New Century and featuring music of David Lang, Jacob ter Veldhuis, and Barbara Kolb, released by Alanna in 2008. Prior recordings, all for Channel Classics Records, include the "The Art of Fugue," hailed by the *International Record Review* as "a revelation" and "Standards," an album of original works for saxophone quartet ranging from Jean-Baptiste Singelée (his *Premier Quatuor* of 1857, commonly considered the first work for saxophone quartet) to Bob Mintzer's *Quartet No. 1*. "A New Century Christmas," featuring unusual arrangements by a wide range of American composers, preceded that, winning enormous critical acclaim ("the aural equivalent of spiked eggnog," according to the *Chicago Tribune*) and was featured on National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition." Earlier in 2000, Channel released "Home Grown," an album comprising works commissioned by the ensemble. New Century's first recording, "Drastic Measures," won acclaim from *Fanfare Magazine* for its "elegant musicianship with a wonderful sense of chamber music." Their second recording, "Main Street USA," includes the ensemble's arrangements of music by Bernstein, Gershwin, and Morton Gould.

The New Century Saxophone Quartet has appeared on television and radio across the United States on American Public Media's "Performance Today," the Voice of America, and North Carolina Public TV. New Century has been the resident ensemble of two radio stations in North Carolina, WUNC in Chapel Hill (1995) and WHQR in Wilmington (1996). Outside of the United States, Panamanian TV aired a documentary and live performance, and in the Netherlands, Dutch radio presented a live broadcast from the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. The ensemble participated in a special performance for the Chinese New Year in January 1998 that was broadcast to over 100 million people on television throughout the world.

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