

After half a century, Portland String Quartet violist quietly takes her bow

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The Portland String Quartet – from left, Dean Stein, Ronald Lantz, Julia Adams and Andrew Mark – performing at Woodfords Congregational Church. Adams, the only only viola player the ensemble has ever had, is retiring after 51 seasons of performance. *Staff photo by Jill Brady/Staff Photographer*

She didn't realize it at the time, but Julia Adams played her final concert with the Portland String Quartet on Jan. 19. A week or so later, the violist with one of the world's enduring classical music quartets decided that this season, the quartet's 51st, would be her last. She told her ensemble mates of her plans, but kept the news private otherwise.

Then the pandemic hit, forcing the quartet to cancel the remainder of its season. After performing thousands of times and – as far as she can remember – never missing a concert in a half-century as an original member of the quartet, Adams is retiring quietly, with little public fanfare.

"My decision has nothing to do with the pandemic, but it is making it easier. There is no final concert, where everybody says goodbye," said Adams, 79, one of two founding members, with violinist Ronald Lantz, who was still performing with the quartet this season. "I went out

on a high note with the quartet. I worked very hard to keep my playing as strong as possible, and our literature was extra difficult on that last concert in January. I am proud of that.”

Her final piece was Edvard Grieg String Quartet No. 1, which she described as a “whopper” and an appropriate bookend for her performance career as a violist. The first piece she performed in public on the viola was Debussy’s String Quartet, which she tackled as a college student. “From my first to the last, and everything in between, they were all challenging,” she said.

Adams, who lives in Portland, will continue to teach.

The Portland String Quartet remains one of Maine’s long-lasting cultural institutions, and has been locking up honors and acclaim for decades. Its founding members – Adams, Lantz, violinist Steve Kecskemethy and cellist Paul Ross – came together as a side project of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, beginning with the 1969 performance season. Then-PSO music director Paul Vermel brought the members of the quartet together to do orchestra outreach. They eventually became independent of the orchestra, and for more than four decades, the ensemble performed without a member change.



Photo by Tom Jones Julia Adams

The first occurred only after Kecskemethy became sick and had to stop performing in 2011. Ross retired in 2015. There have been two cellists since, Patrick Owen and Andrew Mark. And now there will be a new violist, because the quartet will continue, said Carolyn Paulin, president of the Portland String Quartet Society, which supports the quartet by presenting the Portland concert series. She called it “heartbreaking” that the quartet’s final concert in its series, scheduled for May 10, was canceled. A secret send-off had been planned to honor her.

Though he has known of Adams’ plans since January, Lantz was still taken aback by her decision when he discussed her retirement from performance this week. They arrived in Maine together in 1966, lured here by Vermel to begin a federally funded music program called Music in Maine, which was designed to provide live music performances in all Maine public elementary schools. Fresh from college and conservatory study, the musicians toured across the state for three years, creating musical and personal bonds that are still intact.

“I’m at a bit of a loss for words,” Lantz said. “It occurred to me, there has never been a Portland String Quartet without the two of us as the middle voices. We shared a very special feeling about that. There is a teamwork with middle voices in a quartet, and we had the

same feeling about it and really connected. The whole quartet was a family, obviously. But we relied on each other a lot and worked together a lot,” Lantz said.

In an email, Vermel called Adams a first-rate musician, a gifted performer and “the heart and soul of the PSQ for 51 years.” He described the longevity of the quartet, and in particular the four-plus decades without a member change, as “really unprecedented in the classical music world. But what is the most remarkable is the constant and continuing freshness of their playing and the enthusiasm they all share for performing. Nothing is taken for granted, and every piece they play, whether they have performed it many times before or whether it’s new to them, is rehearsed and performed with the utmost respect and love. And they remain caring colleagues and friends. Truly amazing people, and I am honored to call them my friends,” he wrote.

Adams grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, and played the violin in elementary, junior and high school with a leading strings instructor, J. Kimball Harriman. She didn’t move to the viola until she studied music in college. “They needed a violist in their major string quartet at the conservatory, so I picked up the viola. I borrowed an instrument from the school,” she said.

She has barely put it down since. Her career has been an artistic journey with the opportunity to perform for music lovers in Maine, across the country and around the world, including tours of Russia, Japan and across South America. As a performer, she said she was always motivated by her own self-judgment as opposed to the opinions of others. “After a while, you realize there is a judgment made on your playing by yourself, as well as your audience and hopefully a critic. There is that pressure to do your best and hold up the reputation of the group. Each one of us does that. It’s important not to let the group down, and that is the beauty of chamber music, the way we work together.”

That said, the opinion of others does matter. Adams was instrumental in securing a key review from The New York Times in the November 1984, when the quartet performed at Alice Tulley Hall in New York. Adams wrote a letter to music critic Tim Page, inviting him to the concert. “It would mean the world to us if you could hear us play,” she recalls writing.



The Portland String Quartet has kept its original personnel through 37 years of concertizing, recording and teaching. (Photograph by Bruce Kennett)

A midcareer photo of the Portland Sting Quartet, with (from left) Paul Ross, Ronald Lantz, Julia Adams and the late Steve Kecskemethy. *Photo by Bruce Kennett, courtesy of Portland String Quartet*

The critic showed up. "My husband was sitting in the audience and noticed a man who looked rather newspaper-ish, with a pencil and paper. He went up to him at intermission and said, 'Are you by any chance Tim Page?' and he said, 'I am.' Well, you can imagine. He came right back to us backstage and said, 'Guys, you won't believe this, but Tim Page is in the audience and he is writing a review.'"

He wrote that the quartet "performed brilliantly," saying: "One couldn't have asked for more persuasive, more unified and more yearningly lyrical playing."

"It's little breaks like that – these fabulous, wonderful, exuberant moments – that mean so much in the professional life of a group, especially in Maine where you are a little isolated," Adams said.

Dean Stein, who joined the quartet after Kecskemethy retired, called Adams an ideal collaborator, because she offers her own ideas while welcoming the ideas of others. "Trying out these different ideas, rooted in positive interactions, brings a great joy to working together. It results in performances where I can look over at Julia to share a smile over a phrase we play together and know in advance how much we will enjoy playing it for the audience," he wrote in an email.

Her legacy, he added, "will be one of steadfast promotion of musical values as inspirational to her countless students and audiences alike. Recordings she has made with the Portland String Quartet have already been tested by time and are held in high regard. In her career is the story of following your dream with everything you've got, and letting that, first and foremost, be its own reward."
