



Healthy Competition

Ten young ensembles and a capacity audience are set to share profound cultural and spiritual experiences at the 15th Banff International String Quartet Competition (25 - 31 August 2025)

Triennial event, held at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, includes world premiere of a new work by Canadian composer Kati Agócs and a final round featuring three outstanding quartets

Competition's commitment to the future of string quartet playing is mirrored in major international career development and mentoring opportunities for its laureates

"Many competitions exist for chamber music, but no competition is as prestigious for string quartets exclusively as Banff," Philip Setzer, Emerson String Quartet

Stability and renewal have been essential elements of the string quartet ever since the medium took root almost three centuries ago. Those sustaining qualities stand at the heart of the Banff International String Quartet Competition (BISQC), a global beacon of excellence in the realm of chamber music. The triennial event celebrates its 15th edition this year with a compelling programme of core compositions, modern masterworks and new music. It offers a unique platform to ten of the world's finest young string quartets and an equally unique package of financial prizes, professional opportunities and career development support. The Competition, set to run from Monday 25 to Sunday 31 August 2025, is a flagship event presented by Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the sublime surrounding of the Canadian Rockies.

Barry Shiffman, Director of Banff International String Quartet Competition since 2006, has first-hand knowledge of the power of BISQC to shape the professional progress of its laureates. He was a founding member of and second violinist with the St. Lawrence String Quartet, which won the Competition's fourth edition in 1992 and subsequently established its place among the front rank of international ensembles. String quartet playing, he observes, is presently enjoying a golden age, burnished not least by the post-competition success of such BISQC winners as the Cecilia String Quartet (2010), the Dover Quartet (2013), the Mamsen Quartet and the Viano Quartet (2019), and the Isidore String Quartet (2019), and fuelled by a seemingly insatiable audience appetite for chamber music.

"This is a time of explosive growth in opportunities in the chamber music world," notes Barry Shiffman. "We often hear about shrinking opportunities elsewhere within classical music, and there are real challenges to address across the sector. But within the field of chamber music, we're seeing an extraordinary surge in new festivals and performance platforms, particularly in North America, many of them founded within the last two decades. The high number of applicants we received for this year's BISQC reflects that growth, which bodes well both for the Competition's future and for the continuing growth of the genre. The opportunities for our winners and laureates are truly significant."

Shiffman cites his experience as Artistic Director of Rockport Music, where a small chamber music festival in a seaside village in Massachusetts has grown into a year-round programme with a purpose-built concert hall, and points to comparable developments achieved by Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound, Ontario, La Jolla Music Society in California, and elsewhere.

BISQC is an essential part of Banff Centre's institutional identity. As a post-secondary institution and global leader in arts and leadership programmes, supporting emerging quartets is part of its mission to propel forward the next generation of artists from around the world. With many programmes at Banff Centre, there is an opportunity to connect artists and audiences through public exhibitions, readings, concerts, and performances. That is especially true for the dedicated followers of BISQC, who quickly snapped up 2025 Competition packages within seconds of them going on sale, demonstrating the deep devotion of audiences to the captivating richness and range of the chamber music repertoire.

“The BISQC community is one of the most inspiring facets of Banff Centre life. How these audiences follow the Competition and consistently show up out of love for the music and support for these young quartets is heartwarming,” says Chris Lorway, President and CEO of Banff Centre. “What Barry and the BISQC team have created is not only about the music, but the experience of hearing that music together, in the mountains, and connecting with the next generation of music greats.”

“When people come to BISQC, they are coming to a festival of music-making,” comments Shiffman. “We see people who crave community, who want to share in the experience of gathering together, sitting down to eat together, of being together, listening together and following the trajectory of these incredible groups for a week. People leave changed by their experience of being part of BISQC. What our audience members and performers share is special and genuinely transformative. It’s something which many of our young quartets take away with them and try to replicate elsewhere. Of course, the quartets are here to compete, but it doesn’t feel like they’re competing against each other. They come to Banff and become part of a very special chamber music community.”

In addition to exploring quartets by Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert, works from the period of musical Romanticism, and one piece from a prescribed list of 20th-century scores, this year’s BISQC participants will also perform a specially commissioned quartet by Canadian composer Kati Agócs, hailed by the *Boston Globe* as creator of ‘sublime music of fluidity and austere beauty’. Among the hallmarks of the Competition’s World Premiere is the close attention paid by BISQC’s audience to a new score and its performance by all ten participating quartets. “Our audience is not a hardcore audience for new music,” observes Barry Shiffman. “But this event has become one of the most popular of all with them. This year’s round sold out within two weeks!”

The Banff International String Quartet Competition, under Shiffman’s direction, has pioneered a three-year career development programme to support its first-prize laureates. The package includes a carefully constructed series of international tour dates; a recording residency; the Southern Methodist University Peak Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence Prize, a paid residency worth \$110,000 CAD; an Esterházy Foundation Residency with concerts at the Haydnsaal in Eisenstadt and at the Lucerne Festival; and the prospect of a chamber music residency hosted by Britten Pears Arts at Snape Maltings. Since 2016, all quartets invited to BISQC have received financial prizes to support the next phase of their development, while the three finalists are offered residency opportunities at Banff Centre. The Competition’s long tail of career development and mentoring recognises the importance of nurturing a new generation of world-class string quartets.

Mark Steinberg, this year’s BISQC Mentor-in-Residence, is first violinist and a founding member of the Brentano Quartet. He will be present in Banff throughout the Competition, ready to respond to requests for advice from participants and provide a listening ear. “The creative element of mentoring is a big part of what we do,” says Barry Shiffman. “It fits so well with the ethos of Banff Centre, which has always been about deep immersion in mentorship opportunities, in creativity and free thinking. It occurred to us that the quartets who come to Banff for BISQC should have access to that ethos. The Mentor-in-Residence role grew from there and, through the generosity of a very special donor, is now an endowed feature of the Competition. It provides an important resource to our quartets while they’re with us, meaning they have a fifth pair of ears at a rehearsal, somebody to help if they’re having disagreements about interpretation or an invaluable source of advice from a deeply experienced artist.”

Membership of the carefully curated Preliminary and Competition Juries for BISQC reads like a Who’s Who of chamber music performance. The line-up for this year’s Competition Jury includes the violinist Eugene Drucker, a founding member of the Emerson String Quartet; Marie Chilleme, violist with Quatuor Ébène; Eckhart Runge, cellist with the Artemis Quartet; and Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, founding violist with the Dover Quartet and now a member of the piano quartet Espressivo! It falls to the Competition Jury to choose three quartets to advance to BISQC’s fifth and final round. The Preliminary Jury, responsible for narrowing the field of applicants to ten Competition participants, comprises Ayane Kozasa, founder member of the Aizuri Quartet and violist with the Kronos Quartet; Guillaume Sutre, first violinist of Ysaye Quartet and founding member of Trio Wanderer; and cellist Joshua Gindele, a founding member of the Miró Quartet. All jury members have been invited to serve because of their combination of outstanding artistic credentials and deep empathy for those taking part in the Competition.

While today’s young string quartets often own extraordinary technical prowess, Banff International String Quartet Competition aims to discover those groups that show signs of genuine artistic insight and have begun to develop a unique voice. “In a certain sense, the general level of playing in music is higher than it has ever been,” notes Barry Shiffman. “The level of string quartet playing certainly gets better and better. But the level of artistry does not follow the fast-rising trajectory of technical accomplishment that we see every year. There are some things that cannot be rushed, artistic development being one of them. It takes a certain amount of time to become a great quartet and build the artistry that goes with it. A career is not made on the night of the finals; a career is nuanced, both exciting and challenging, and needs to be very carefully cradled. That is what BISQC is here to support.”

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