

Sunday, February 17, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland, *violin*
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, *violin*
Asbjørn Nørgaard, *viola*
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, *cello*

PROGRAM

Franz Joseph HAYDN (1732–1809) String Quartet No. 25 in C Major,
Op. 20, No. 2, (H.III:32)
Moderato
Capriccio
Menuet: Allegretto
Fuga Allegro

Anton WEBERN (1883–1945) String Quartet (1905)

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135
Allegretto
Vivace
Lento assai e cantante tranquillo
Grave ma non troppo tratto – Allegro

*The Danish String Quartet currently records exclusively with ECM Records
and has previously recorded for Dacapo Records and CAvi-Music/BR Klassik.*

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Franz Joseph Haydn
String Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2
 (H.III:32)

Accustomed to the breadth and expressiveness of string quartets by those who followed Franz Joseph Haydn, we may not recognize his own quartets as groundbreaking. They were. Haydn defined what a quartet could be—giving composers new ways of thinking about the genre, demonstrating strategies that enabled them to communicate.

Haydn composed the six quartets of his Opus 20 in 1772, while serving Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy as palace music director, a secure position that allowed him the leisure and freedom to experiment. Around this time, the extravagant postures of the European Baroque gave way to *Sturm und Drang*, a movement that would morph into Romanticism, with its elevation of human feelings and instabilities, and a love of dark forests and craggy mountain ranges. In two years, Goethe would publish *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which in Western literary history ruptured past from future as surely as Haydn's Opus 20 bade farewell to the style of earlier quartets.

Before Opus 20, string quartets had starred the violins. Here Haydn puts the players on equal footing. He starts with the cello, which outlines the elegant opening theme, accompanied by second violin and viola. Only after the cello finishes his statement does the first violin enter to repeat it. Throughout the exposition, the four instruments intertwine. Haydn controls the music's flow through light and shade, like a painter capturing the same scene at dawn and noon and dusk. As the exposition ends, the dynamic level subsides and the mood darkens—to be dispelled by the bright initial theme as the exposition repeat begins. The development explores what has come before, but from the point of view of the minor mode. Even in his recapitulation, Haydn continues to unearth new facets in his material. Finally the opening theme reappears, then the voices hush.

For a sense of the emotion Haydn could pack into a quartet, look no further than the oddly named *Capriccio*. It opens in declamatory gestures touched by a hint of lament, leading to a

grave conversation that unfolds in an almost operatic scene. As relief, the first violin sings a sweetly consoling song that fails to keep the music from finally disintegrating.

The third-movement minuet captures the spirit of a country dance. Here the central section, where we often expect contrastingly lighter music, is made of sterner stuff. Nowhere is the new equality among the instrumental members more evident than in the concluding fugue. The chattering continues *sotto voce* until the final outburst, each member proclaiming proudly in his own voice—another display of how much four string instruments can do.

Anton Webern
String Quartet (1905)

Anton Webern, with Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, is one of the composers identified as part of the Second Viennese School—as compared to tonalists like Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, who presumably made up a first “school.” While Webern's early works reveal a Romantic sensibility, he admired his teacher Schoenberg and adopted that composer's 12-tone system of composition, going on to write music you might imagine plotted on a spreadsheet, dauntingly abstract and sometimes so brief that it spans seconds rather than minutes. “The impact of these works on the general public and on the critics,” wrote Nicolas Slonimsky, “was usually disconcerting.”

Despite the hostility or indifference of audiences, Webern continued to write the music he believed in. Stravinsky, who knew how to please listeners, offered a touching tribute to his older colleague: “Doomed to total failure in a deaf world of ignorance and indifference, he inexorably kept on cutting out his diamonds, his dazzling diamonds, of whose mines he had a perfect knowledge.” Ill fortune followed Webern. One September evening in 1945, unaware of the curfew set by occupying troops, the composer stepped outside his home near Salzburg. A US Army MP shot and killed him.

Webern's String Quartet of 1905 reveals someone deeply interested in connecting with his audience, in communicating a sense of inner splendor. Discovered after his death, it received

its first performance only in 1962. Sixty years before that, Webern saw a triptych of Alpine landscapes by the Italian painter Giovanni Segantini. Something in Webern responded to the mountainous country the painter depicts, and the pastoral scenes influenced him as he wrote the quartet. To his diary Webern confided: “I long for an artist in music such as Segantini was in painting. His music would have to be a music that a man writes in solitude, far away from all the turmoil of the world, in contemplation of the glaciers, of eternal ice and snow...” That reverent wonder is also reflected in lines with which the composer prefaced his quartet, from the 17th-century German philosopher and mystic Jakob Böhme:

I cannot describe the spiritual triumph I felt.
I can compare it to nothing other than life
born in the midst of death. It is like the res-
urrection of the dead.

In this light my spirit sees the essence of all
things and sees God in all creatures, even in
weeds and grass—who he is and what he is
and what his will is.

The quartet is inward and contemplative and filled with spiritual optimism. It derives much of its power from the tonal ambiguity that permeates the work, evoking a sense of uncertainty, implying a kind of search—extra-musical qualities suggested by Webern’s comments on Segantini, and in the epigraph from Böhme. Webern delivers an emotional experience far out of proportion to the quartet’s 15-minute length, meandering through thickets of indeterminate harmony, resolving with the clarity of conventional tonal music in a sudden peak of exaltation, and again in a final reverie of deep calm.

The work unfolds in three roughly differentiated parts, played with no break. Time stands still at the outset, but scarcely more than a minute passes before a twisting figure intrudes, the first music that bears a melodic contour easily negotiated by ears tuned to tonal music. This is developed, grows impassioned, and crests triumphantly. A pause follows, then a passage slow and subdued, its gossamer textures leading into the by-now-familiar twisting figure. Pensive at its reappearance, the figure again rises to an exultant apex, ending the quartet’s first and longest

section. Placid music occupies the second section. The touch of anxious agitation that opens the third section becomes a keening that resolves at last in serenity.

Ludwig van Beethoven String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135

Grandeur intimidates. Commentators have cloaked the late string quartets of Ludwig van Beethoven in so much majesty that many listeners fear they will never grasp these works, so why bother trying. But of all Beethoven’s music, the late quartets strike me as most comprehensible to a 21st-century sensibility. Their introspection, sometimes odd harmonies, aspiration, and a humor that has more in common with barroom jokes than drawing room *bon mots*—all this gives them immediate presence.

Even by Beethoven’s standards, Opus 135, from 1826—16th and last of his string quartets—is urgent and affirming music. The opening movement at first hearing seems constructed with fragments of tunes, yet the leaping figure that launches the work is heard in variants and different rhythmic guises throughout, and is repeated literally at the end. This movement may feel improvisatory. It’s not.

The Vivace, a rolling ball that darts from corner to corner and which you’ll never catch, illustrates what composer John Adams calls Beethoven’s “ecstatic energy.” Adams assigns this music a major role in *Absolute Jest*, his orchestral riff on Beethoven scherzos—those *tours de force* into which Beethoven poured, as Adams says, an “inspired sense of movement and happiness.”

Now the forward thrust stops and aims inward. Grave, searching, penetrating—we heard such music in the Webern Quartet—the Lento explores stasis. A sense of timelessness, a mood voiced in the full-throated opening song, saturates this enveloping music. Even when it recedes and we no longer hear the song, we sense its presence and welcome it as it re-emerges, to be completed, as the movement concludes.

Beethoven titles the finale “Der schwere gefasste Entschluss.” English offers no elegant equivalent; “the difficult decision seized upon” conveys the sense literally, but with a heavy German accent. At the head of the movement

Beethoven notates two figures, each made of three notes. Above the first, heard as viola and cello voice the movement's *grave* opening, he writes three words, as though the music is a setting for them: "Muss es sein?" (Must it be?) A moment later, the violins state a figure made of three equal stresses, then repeat it. Above this figure Beethoven has written, "Es muss sein! Es muss sein!" (It must be! It must be!) The wordplay suggests the kind of cosmic riddle we might expect from this composer. But permeating the allegro is that second three-note figure—"Es muss sein!"—heard now as a short unstressed syllable plus two longer hard stresses, and repeated as a taunt: "Es muss sein! Es muss sein!" The mockery suggests something less exalted than the existential question-and-answer with which Beethoven prefaces the movement. James M. Keller (in his *Chamber Music: A Listener's Guide*) offers an explanation. He refers to Beethoven biographer Alexander Wheelock Thayer's story of a Viennese official, one Dembscher, who wanted to borrow the performance parts of Beethoven's Opus 130 quartet. A friend, acting as go-between, assured Dembscher that the composer would supply the music—in return for a fee. "Must it be?" asked Dembscher.

The answer: "It must be." "Beethoven was so amused on hearing about this transaction," Keller writes, "that he wrote a little canon to memorialize the event." He continues: "Beethoven was not one to undervalue his own jokes, and apparently he couldn't get this little jest out of his mind. So there it is again, as the theme of the canon that pops up to head the last movement of his quartet." Beethoven's friend Anton Schindler ascribes the question-and-answer to some banter between the composer and his housekeeper. Keller also provides a postscript. Beethoven told his French publisher that he composed the last movement only because he needed the money. Necessity must have simplified the "difficult decision." "You can see from the motto 'Es muss sein,'" Beethoven confessed, "that I wrote it with reluctance."

Beethoven was no solemn artist. We can savor his grandeur, but I doubt he would have wanted grandeur to stand between us and his music.

—Larry Rothe

Larry Rothe is author of Music for a City, Music for the World and co-author of For the Love of Music.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Among today's many exceptional chamber music groups, the **Danish String Quartet** continuously asserts its preeminence. The group's playing reflects impeccable musicianship, sophisticated artistry, exquisite clarity of ensemble, and, above all, an expressivity inextricably bound to the music, from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. The quartet's performances display a rare musical spontaneity, giving audiences the sense of hearing even treasured canon repertoire as if for the first time, and exuding a palpable joy in music-making that has made the group enormously popular on concert stages around the world.

Since its debut in 2002, the Danish String Quartet has demonstrated a special affinity for Scandinavian composers, from Nielsen to Hans Abrahamsen, alongside music of Mozart and

Beethoven. The quartet's musical interests also encompass Nordic folk music, the focus of its newest recording, *Last Leaf*, on the ECM label. The recipient of numerous awards and prestigious appointments including the Borletti Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to the Bowers Program of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (formerly CMS Tw).

The Danish String Quartet began its current season in Europe with appearances at the Lammermuir Festival in Scotland, followed by Norway's Trondheim Festival, where the artists performed Mendelssohn's Octet with the Maxwell Quartet, and collaborated with pianist Joseph Kalichstein in Brahms' Piano Quintet. The season also includes a return to London's

Wigmore Hall for a program of Beethoven and Webern. The quartet tours North America, including performances in Toronto, Richmond, Ann Arbor, and New York, and is presented by the 92nd Street Y, Washington Performing Arts, Houston Da Camera, Ensemble Music Society in Indianapolis, and Rockport Music. Concert programs include works by Haydn, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn; the String Quartet No. 1, *Ten Preludes*, by the contemporary Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen; and Scandinavian folk song arrangements. In Europe, the quartet travels to Munich, Milan, Antwerp, Berlin, Hamburg, and Madrid. The artists return to the United States for performances in La Jolla and Santa Barbara, appear for the first time in Logan, Provo, and Los Alamos, and return to the Vancouver Recital Society and Laramie.

The ensemble's expansive 2017–18 North American season included more than 30 performances across 17 states. The quartet made numerous debuts, including summer festival appearances at Interlochen Center for the Arts, Bravo! Vail, and Ravinia, as well as with the Cleveland Chamber Music Society, Ensemble Music Society of Indianapolis, Santa Fe Pro Musica, Oregon Bach Festival, and San Francisco Performances. The musicians returned to the Mostly Mozart Festival, the UW World Series at Meany Hall in Seattle, and the chamber music societies of Lincoln Center, Philadelphia, and Buffalo, and collaborated with Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen in Ravinia and cellist Jakob Koranyi as part of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center residency at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. In Europe, they toured Denmark, Norway, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands; additional tours included Australia and Asia.

The group takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007 they established the DSQ Festival, which takes place in an intimate and informal setting in Copenhagen. In October, the quartet performed, over the course of six concerts, the complete Beethoven cycle of 16 string quartets. In 2016 they inaugurated a new-music festival, Series of Four, for which they both perform and invite colleagues including the Ebène Quartet and

mandolin player Chris Thile to appear at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall. Concerts this season range from a chamber version of the Fauré Requiem to a recital with violinist Augustin Hadelich, and the Scandinavian debut of the Vision String Quartet.

The Danish String Quartet has received numerous citations and prizes, including First Prize in the Vagn Homboe String Quartet Competition and the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in the Netherlands, as well as the Audience Prize at the 2005 Trondheim International String Quartet Competition. In 2009 the quartet won First Prize in the 11th London International String Quartet Competition, now known as the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition; the artists return to the celebrated London concert hall frequently. In 2011 the group received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark.

Named Artist-in-Residence in 2006 by the Danish Radio, the quartet was offered the opportunity to record the Nielsen string quartets at the Danish Radio Concert Hall. The two CDs, released in 2007 and 2008 on the Dacapo label, garnered enthusiastic praise—"these Danish players have excelled in performances of works by Brahms, Mozart and Bartók in recent years. But they play Nielsen's quartets as if they owned them," noted the *New York Times*. In 2012 the quartet released a recording of Haydn and Brahms quartets on the German Avi-music label, for which they also received critical praise. Subsequently, they recorded works by Brahms and Robert Fuchs with clarinetist Sebastian Manz, released by Avi-music in 2014; *Wood Works*, an album of traditional Scandinavian folk music, released by Dacapo in 2017 and one of the top classical albums of the year, including on Spotify; and music of Thomas Adès, Per Nørgård, and Abrahamsen, the quartet's debut album on ECM.

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