



music dance theater
Cal Performances
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY



Spektral Quartet



Jeremy Geffen

Welcome to this afternoon's concert with the marvelous Spektral Quartet. As usual, this bold and innovative ensemble arrives with a program designed to illuminate the connections between beloved works in the canon and fresh new repertoire by living composers. The group's Berkeley debut (following last season's online performance with American vocalist, flutist, and composer Nathalie Joachim) features the world premiere of a new work by Samuel Adams, along with Schubert's haunting *Rosamunde* Quartet, and Philip Glass' *Company* Quartet. Spektral Quartet recently announced that this season will be its last, capping a remarkable 11 years as one of America's most adventurous string ensembles. Their final performances will take place this summer, so I'm very happy that today, we can all enjoy this chance to experience the music-making of these four gifted artists.

While we at Cal Performances like to think of each of our programs as unique and remarkable, next week offers another season highlight when co-producers and stars Alicia Hall Moran (mezzo-soprano) and Jason Moran (piano) arrive on campus for the West Coast premiere of their brilliant *Two Wings: The Music of Black America in Migration* (Feb 17, Zellerbach Hall), a series of "gripping portraits of a vast social upheaval" (*Chicago Tribune*) that explores the Great Migration of six million Black Americans from the rural South to northern cities, the West, and beyond. This ambitious production (a Cal Performances *Illuminations* "Place and Displacement" presentation) features a star-studded roster of guest performers, writers, and thinkers, headed by composer/conductor (and 2021 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Music) Tania León, narrator Donna Jean Murch (author of *Living for the City*), and the Imani Winds chamber ensemble (to name just a few!). Together, these exceptional artists trace the Morans' family histories through the music that accompanied their brave antecedents throughout the 20th century, from Harlem Renaissance-era jazz, gospel hymns, and Broadway show tunes, to classical and chamber music and the artists' own compositions.

February marks the time each year when Cal Performances' programming shifts into high gear. From now through the beginning of May, the remainder of our 2021–22 season is packed with ambitious and adventurous programming. You won't want to miss...

- sensational dance performances like *Memphis Jookin': The Show*, featuring Lil Buck (Feb 25–26); *The Joffrey Ballet* (Mar 4–6); and the *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater* (Mar 29 – Apr 3)
- the West Coast premiere (Mar 12) of *Place*, Ted Hearne and Saul Williams' bold meditation on the topographies of gentrification and displacement, another *Illuminations* "Place and Displacement" event
- the renowned *English Baroque Soloists* with conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner in a transfixing program of works by Mozart and Haydn (Apr 10)
- the peerless *London Symphony Orchestra* (Mar 20), appearing under the direction of superstar conductor Sir Simon Rattle in a program of orchestral masterworks
- pianist *extraordinaire* Mitsuko Uchida playing and directing Mozart with the *Mahler Chamber Orchestra* (Mar 27)
- our 2021–22 artist-in-residence Angélique Kidjo in her brand new music-theater piece *Yemandja* (a highly anticipated Cal Performances co-commission and *Illuminations* event, Apr 23).

Fasten your seatbelts; we have all of this—plus much more—in store for you!

We're very proud of our new and updated winter brochure and know that a few minutes spent reviewing our schedule—in print or online—will reveal a wealth of options for your calendar; now is the perfect time to guarantee that you have the best seats for all the events you plan to attend.

I know you join us in looking forward to what lies ahead, to coming together once again to encounter the life-changing experiences that only the live performing arts deliver. We can't wait to share it all with you during the coming months.

Sunday, February 13, 2022, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Spektral Quartet

Clara Lyon, *violin*
Maeve Feinberg, *violin*
Doyle Armbrust, *viola*
Russell Rolen, *cello*

PROGRAM

- Phillip Glass (b. 1937) String Quartet No. 2, *Company*
- Franz Schubert (1797–1828) String Quartet in A minor, D. 804,
Rosamunde
Allegro ma non troppo
Andante
Menuetto. Allegretto – Trio
Allegro moderato

INTERMISSION

- Samuel Adams String Quartet No. 2, *Current*
(World Premiere)*
fast, noisy (rallentando)
fast, quiet, building (for Chris Stark)
quiet, patient
fast, noisy (ritornello)
pulsing, simple (for Ingram Marshall)

* *World Premiere. Commissioned by
Spektral Quartet and Cal Performances,
with additional assistance from New Music USA.*

Spektral Quartet records for Parlour Tapes+, Azica, Aparté, New Focus Recordings, and Sono Luminus.



RIDE THIS CURRENT

The creation of music is a continuum. A beautiful, complicated, labyrinthine continuum for which the terms “new” and “traditional” are far too limiting. In fact, let me propose that the only dichotomy that truly exists in the sonic realm is “Music I’ve heard” vs. “Music I have yet to hear.”

In Spektral Quartet, we’ve staked our entire career on this principle: that the space in which music of the past interacts with music of the present is where the magic lives. An extraordinary thing happens when we draw parallels between works separated by decades or centuries: the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and enticing. This alchemy burns brightly in both directions: music written before our great-great-grandparents were born is vitalized in a new way when performed in dialogue with a piece published only recently—and fresh, wet ink doesn’t sound so foreign when paired with a historic score that shares some of the same creative motivations.

Which brings us to the program you’re about to experience...and well done, friend, you’ve picked a particularly good one!

First, there was our desire to see what Philip Glass, Franz Schubert, and Samuel Adams had to say to one another. The most apparent connection appears with their use of transformation through repetition—in the literal sense with the minimalist cycling found in the Glass and Adams, as well as with Schubert’s signature waves of arpeggios underpinning a melody. There is a beautiful hypnosis in areas of each that sets a distinctive mood, but in a way that allows the listener to bring their own experience to the landscape.

This is also a project born out of friendship. The Glass is one of the first contemporary works four friends with aspirations of becoming a professional string quartet played together more than a decade ago. The Schubert was unanimously exciting to the quartet—four musicians in a friendship that might be more accurately described as a marriage—as we brainstormed exceptional pieces from the traditional repertoire that deserve more time on stage. And our commissioning of Samuel Adams is the result of a friendship that deepened during Sam’s

tenure as composer-in-residence for our hometown band, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Now, on to the music...

What was your introduction to the music of Philip Glass? Mine was a cassette of *Glassworks* that I pilfered from my mother’s collection in the 4th grade. For a composer who has penned over 30 operas, 12 symphonies, and eight string quartets, it’s perhaps unusual that the culture tends to focus on his film scoring, but those iconic works—*Koyaanisqatsi*, *The Truman Show*, *The Hours*, etc.—no doubt account for the reason that “Philip Glass” is one of the few living composers that just about any American can name at the drop of a hat.

For his *String Quartet No. 2, Company*, we are in the realm of not film, but theater. Glass was approached for this commission by the performer Frederick Neuman to create interstitial music for Samuel Beckett’s novella, *Company*, which Neuman would perform as a monologue. Beckett’s writing here is unique because of its autobiographical content—an existential fever dream in which vignettes from his past—such as leaping out of a tree only to be saved by the branches beneath—escape to the surface.

As Glass tells it, “I liked the idea of using the medium of the string quartet that would allow for both an introspective and passionate quality well suited to the text. Not surprisingly, these four short movements have turned out to be a thematically cohesive work that now, as my *String Quartet No. 2*, has taken on a life of its own.”

Encountering Glass’ *Quartet No. 2* is something like being tucked into the window seat on a train as rain streams horizontally across the glass. Amidst this melancholic atmosphere, the hypnotic effect of telephone polls whipping past at regular intervals and street lights intermittently inflaming the retreating droplets of water makes introspection impossible to avoid. There is a moodiness to it, and yet because of its cyclical nature, it becomes a blank canvas onto which one’s own nostalgia, or regret, or wistfulness, come into focus just as vividly—and per-



sonally—as that of those sitting to your left and right in this concert hall.

Given the turmoil and heartbreak that Franz Schubert was weathering in his personal life, it might be expected that his **String Quartet in A minor (*Rosamunde*)** would be a bleak, cheerless affair. He was failing publicly as an opera composer, deteriorating physically from syphilis, and overwhelmed by depression. If his circumstances made their way, even in small ways, onto the page—and can any composer really divorce their music completely from their own experience?—any silliness or despondency does not linger long here.

Take the opening as an excellent example. An obsessive ostinato (repeating rhythmic figure) in the viola and cello provide a foundation of almost simmering dread—or at least pathos—as the second violin outlines minor harmonies over which the first violin quietly and lyrically laments. And in a mere 22 measures, Schubert parts the clouds for a far more hopeful, major version of this same material. Even if you’ve heard this piece dozens of times, this moment is quite pleasantly unexpected. The second movement (*Andante*) that follows is a charmingly innocent set of variations during which turbulence is fleeting, continually swallowed by song. While the *Menuetto* that follows is perhaps shaded by a patina of blue nostalgia, the culminating fourth movement (*Allegro moderato*) is all glee and gusto. Effervescent virtuosity abounds in the first violin while chipper, dotted-rhythm trots amongst the four voices keep the proceedings upright and lively. Again, only hints of trouble waft in momentarily, but the ending is a curious one. At the risk of projecting autobiography on to this magnificent quartet, the zesty music seems to retreat from our gaze before the credits roll, so to speak, with two very emphatic, final chords. Was this all a blissful daydream—a much-needed escape—from the darker corners of Schubert’s own, unquiet existence? An escape he couldn’t entirely escape?

Schubert was a leaping-off point for our friend Samuel Adams, though his **String Quartet No. 2, *Current***, is neither an homage or a re-imagining. I find it in the obsessive rep-

etition of gestures, especially in the middle section of this extraordinary score. Repetition can give us a satisfying return to a known experience, but it can also create a feeling of claustrophobia...an inability to escape. Here, as in the *Rosamunde*, we have both. Brightly hued, explosive exclamations by the quartet cycle back on themselves, offset by scurrings up the fingerboard—in this case relishing in their sameness rather than held captive by it. This celebratory atmosphere shifts into one of a gentle cascading, as voices take turns bubbling up from a constant stream of fleet 16th-notes. The effect is hypnotic, and deeply pleasurable.

By now, you’ve noticed the four snare drums and the tentacles of black cable reaching back toward center stage. Our cellist, Russ, is triggering electronic tones from his stand that stir, and worry, and excite the drum heads and snare coils at the four corners of the quartet. It is the way in which Sam has integrated these shimmering auras of sound into the acoustic strings that elevates this piece into something altogether fascinating and unusual. Rather than processing our individual instrument sounds through a filter, he instead stirs the electronic realm into an acoustic one so that the sound filling the room is both heightened, but ultimately familiar.

Here’s Sam: “The result is a virtuosic display of four individuals performing with artificial, indifferent musical elements. Together a complex polyphonic organism emerges; the voices from the string quartet are rarely placed in a hierarchy in relation to one another or in relation to the snare drums.”

As we’ve workshopped and performed sections of this mesmeric piece in Chicago and elsewhere, we’ve been struck by the scope and variety of responses from individual members of the audience. Like the Glass, and to some extent like the Schubert, this is music that leaves space for one’s own history, current predicaments, and memory. You, the listener, are not being led down a predetermined path, but rather invited into a vast mirage—a playground in which your thoughts may roam freely, enhanced by these marvelous sounds.

—Doyle Armbrust

The three-time Grammy-nominated **Spektral Quartet** creates vivid conversations between exhilarating works of the past and the extraordinary works of today. With the *New York Times* writing that, “they have everything: a supreme technical command that seems to come easily, a capacity to make complicated music clear, and, most notably, an ability to cast a magic spell,” Spektral is regarded as one of the most forward-thinking ensembles working today.

Actively touring some of the most notable concert venues—including the Kennedy Center, American Academy in Rome, Miller Theater, Library of Congress, and NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts—the quartet also takes great pride in its home city of Chicago: championing the work of local composers, bridging social and aesthetic partitions, and collaborating with artists from a dizzying variety of disciplines.

Named “Chicagoans of the Year” by the *Chicago Tribune* in 2017, Spektral Quartet is most highly regarded for its creative and stylistic versatility: presenting seasons in which, for instance, a thematic program circling Beethoven seamlessly coexists with an improvised sonic meditation at sunrise, a talent show featuring Spektral fans, and the co-release of a jazz album traversing the folk traditions of Puerto Rico. This season, the ensemble released its latest record, *Enigma*: the world premiere recording of Anna Thorvaldsdóttir’s first string quartet, co-commissioned by Spektral, Carnegie Hall, and Washington Performing Arts. An ambitious, multi-year project, *Enigma* will be subsequently released as a virtual reality experience and toured to planetarium dome theaters.

First attracting national attention in 2013 with *Mobile Miniatures*—a project in which over 40 composers including David Lang,

Shulamit Ran, and Nico Muhly were commissioned to write string quartet ringtones for mobile devices—Spektral has enhanced its scope and scale with each passing season to include new works from luminaries including Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, George Lewis, and Augusta Read Thomas, as well as launch the *Once More, With Feeling!* series, which answers contemporary music’s most daunting hurdle by presenting an unfamiliar work twice on the same program, with a composer interview in between.

Distinguished artistic collaborators have included Claire Chase (flutist, International Contemporary Ensemble founder, MacArthur fellow), Theaster Gates (artist, Rebuild Foundation founder), Julia Holter (critically acclaimed songwriter), Nathalie Joachim (composer, Flutronix co-founder), Mark DeChiazza (choreographer, with credits including Kronos Quartet, John Luther Adams, and Steven Mackey), Miguel Zenón (saxophonist, MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow), and Tarek Yamani (Lebanese-American pianist, composer, pedagogue, and band leader).

Committed to not only sustaining, but transforming the string quartet tradition, Spektral Quartet is in-demand for its presentations on inclusion, progressive programming, and entrepreneurship at leading institutions around the country including Carnegie Hall’s Ensemble Connect, the New World Symphony, and the National Association of Schools of Music.

spektralquartet.com

Management

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