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American String Quartet

PETER WINOGRAD, violin
LAURIE CARNEY, violin
DANIEL AVSHALOMOV, viola
WOLFRAM KOESSEL, cello

2:30 PM, Sunday, October 24, 2021
Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of the Pacific

JOSEPH HAYDN **STRING QUARTET NO. 64 IN D MAJOR, OP. 76, NO. 5,**
(1732-1809) **HOB. III:79, "LARGO" OR "FRIEDHOFSQUARTETT"** (c.1797)
Allegretto
Largo. Cantabile e mesto
Menuetto. Allegro
Finale. Presto

SAMUEL BARBER **STRING QUARTET, OP. 11** (1936)
(1910-1981) Adagio

GEORGE WALKER **LAMENT (LYRIC) FOR STRINGS** (1946)
(1922-2018)

— INTERMISSION —

JOHANNES BRAHMS **STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 51, NO. 2** (c.1868-73)
(1833-1897) Allegro non troppo
Andante moderato
Quasi Minuetto, moderato
Finale. Allegro non assai

MKI Artists, One Lawson Lane, Suite 320, Burlington, VT 05401
Please contact Laura Dunaway at (802) 658-2592 laura@melkap.com

americanstringquartet.com

Season Sponsor: C. A. Webster Foundation

ARTIST PROFILE



Internationally recognized as one of the world's finest quartets, the American String Quartet has spent decades honing the luxurious sound for which it is famous. The Quartet celebrates its 47th anniversary in 2021 and has performed in all fifty states and in the most important concert halls worldwide. Their presentations of the complete quartets of Beethoven, Bartók, Schubert, Schoenberg, and Mozart have won widespread critical acclaim. Their MusicMasters Complete Mozart String Quartets, performed on a matched quartet set of instruments by Stradivarius, are widely considered to have set the standard.

Recent seasons featured performances of the Quartet's major project together with the National Book Award-winning author Phil Klay and the poet Tom Sleigh, which offers a groundbreaking program combining music and readings that examines the effects of war. The Quartet also collaborated with the renowned author Salman Rushdie in a work for narrator and quartet by the film composer Paul Cantelon. These tremendously imaginative collaborations cement the American String Quartet's reputation as one of the most adventurous and fearless string quartets performing today.

The Quartet's diverse activities have also included numerous international radio and television broadcasts, including contemporary recording for the BBC; tours of Asia; and performances with the New York City Ballet, the Montreal Symphony, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Recent highlights include performances of an all-sextet program with Roberto and Andrés Díaz, many tours of South America, and performances of the complete Beethoven cycle of string quartets at the Cervantes Festival in Mexico and the Tel Aviv Museum.

Formed when its original members were students at The Juilliard School, the American String Quartet's career began with the group winning both the Coleman Competition and the Naumburg the same year. Resident quartet at the Aspen Music Festival since 1974 and at the Manhattan School of Music in New York since 1984, the American has also served as resident quartet at the Taos School of Music, the Peabody Conservatory, and the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

For many of us, it has been a year or longer without the intellectual stimulation of live chamber music. So, plunging into that void, I give you a quiz to jump-start your return:

What do a popular display after Thanksgiving, a jewelry-themed treat, and a fortune teller's entrance item have in common?

(Hint: you will hear it today.)

Haydn: Quartet No. 64 in D Major

The six String Quartets of Op. 76 form the last complete set that Haydn composed. They were not written for the public, but commissioned by Hungarian Count Erdödy, who enjoyed having them to himself for two years before publishing. At the time of the commission, Haydn was employed at the court of Prince Nicolaus Esterházy II and was composing the oratorio *The Creation* as well as Princess Maria Hermenegild Esterházy's annual mass. As a set, they are undeniably the most well-liked and most often-performed of his 76 quartets, and some would say his greatest quartet masterworks.

Haydn's Op. 76 No. 5 is nicknamed both the *Friedhofsquartett* (Graveyard-Quartet) and *Largo*. Both sobriquets arise from its significant slow movement that rules the work; it is also called the Graveyard because the second movement is oft played at funerals.

The quartets in Opus 76 that precede No. 5 are relatively traditional works as regards form and key structure; this fifth quartet is more of a rebel. The first movement is not in the usual "sonata allegro" form, but a sort of variation interchanging between major and minor, with its stress on force and drama. Despite some fiery, tempestuous writing in the minor portion, the movement provides a sense of buoyancy and refinement.

In distinction, the amazing slow movement turns out to be the emotional and operative focus of the work. Labeled "*Cantabile e mesto*" (songful, sad) the

movement is in the exceptional key of F-sharp major (6 sharps), a key that seems to occupy a separate plane, quite distant from the more welcoming and familiar D major of the first movement. This floating, lofty music is hymn-like but also gentle and familiar. You have heard this key before from Messiaen.

Papa Haydn returns with the minuet, sharing his customary merry pranks: abrupt level changes and inconsistencies with the typical 3/4 meter expectation. The cello counters with a more shadowy mini-perpetual motion in the minor-key Trio, and then the Menuetto returns to finish the movement.

Then comes the Finale, which opens, shockingly, with movement-ending chords and silences – as if to say, "Hey, get ready for this!" The accompaniment distinguishes the Allegro non assai: listen for a briskly repeated interval shared by a pair of instruments, over which the delightful main melody plays out. This is one of the most cheerful, fleet, and exuberant finales of his entire output. There is no end to the frivolities: sections that shrink almost to nothing, games of leapfrog, surprise entrances, eruptions of false fury, and finally a victorious, boisterous, ironic finish.

Barber: Quartet, Op. 11, Adagio

From one point of view, it was his family's fault. Those who lived with young Samuel Barber provided so much music nurturing that he took for granted a belief that his inevitable destiny was to become a musician. He began piano at age 6 and wrote his first composition a year later. At age 12 he served as a church organist, ultimately entering the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. A lengthy, rigorous period of study on piano, composition, and voice followed, as did wide-ranging acknowledgement of his talents: Prix de Rome (1935), Pulitzer Fellowships (1935, 1936), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1945), a New York Music Critics award (1946), and a Pulitzer Prize (1958), among other

distinctive tributes that recognized his work during his life.

Barber composed his String Quartet, Op. 11 in 1936 while on a summer trip to Austria. In 1937 in response to a request from conductor Arturo Toscanini for new American music, he submitted a string orchestra arrangement of the *Adagio* second movement, taken from the three-movement quartet. The *Adagio for Strings* received its premiere in a concert by the newly formed NBC Symphony led by Toscanini and was broadcast nationwide. Because of this extraordinary circumstance, it reached a far larger audience than possible in a typical concert setting and so became the most recognizable version.

The *Adagio for Strings* has come to have an association with tragedy—particularly with great public events of death and mourning, which Barber may have never really intended. It was played after the deaths of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Prince Rainier of Monaco, Grace Kelly, Albert Einstein, and the 9/11 attacks. Because of this, it has also been used in film and television to underscore tragic moments—most notably in *Platoon* and *The Elephant Man*, but also in many other scores.

The clear simplicity of this music makes it especially successful. A forthright diatonic melody presented by the first violin is the *Adagio's* single, imploring theme. Taken up by each member of the quartet, it develops progressively from its quiet opening through solidifying consistency, canonic imitation, and increasing dissonance to one of the most sublime emotional climaxes in the repertoire. This soaring quality is enhanced by the violins reaching their highest register and the fact that Barber never explicitly confirms its key of B-flat minor. After this peak, there is a brief return to the opening texture and

a quiet finish that dies away to oblivion and, following a pause, the piece concludes on a note of acquiescence.

Walker: *Lament for Strings*

George Walker was the first African American composer honored with the Pulitzer Prize for Music, which he received for his work *Lilacs* in 1996.

Walker's first exposure to music was piano at age five. Admitted to Oberlin Conservatory at 14, he later attended the Curtis Institute of Music to study piano with Rudolf Serkin. While there, he also studied chamber music with William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky, and composition with Rosario Scalero, teacher of Samuel Barber. After studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, he gained his doctorate from the Eastman School of Music in 1956.

Walker soloed with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1941 and made his recital debut in Town Hall, New York City, in 1945. He first taught in the 1950s at Dillard University, followed by the New School, Smith College, the University of Colorado, the Peabody Institute, and finally as a full professor at Rutgers.

As a composer, he has produced more than ninety wide-ranging works, including many chamber pieces. He received commissions from the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, and Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras.

Walker's *Lyric for Strings*, written at age 19 in memory of his grandmother who had died the previous year, was his first major composition and remains his best known and most-performed work. Originally titled "Lament for Strings" (and the title preferred by today's artists), it was subsequently used as the second movement of his first string quartet. Analogous to the history of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Walker's *Lyric* proved so popular that the composer repurposed it into a larger orchestral work.

Like the Haydn Largo, the piece is in the rare and difficult key of F-sharp major which here affords a somber warmth. Walker built the music on a brief motive of five eighth-notes followed by a longer note, all within a limited tonal range. It is unfussy in form and twines its way throughout the piece. A middle section in E-flat major is a bit brighter, but as the original key returns, the work ends—much like the Barber—in quiet decorum.

Brahms: *Quartet No. 2 in A Minor*

Those at the top come to be effortless targets for snipers below. Brahms did not escape the slings and arrows of musical journalism; here are just two snipes that came in his direction:

"Herr Dr. Brahms has mastered the art of composing without melodies...his works express nothing more than his musical impotence."

(Salonblatt, Vienna, 1886)

"In the Brahms quartets, there is a constant struggle among the instruments..."

(Miscellanées musicales, Paris, 1884)

But squawking voices did not shout down his music or prevent his greatness from acknowledgment. The royalties he received making him a comparatively wealthy man are the best evidence that the public "got" his music.

More than for any other composer of his time, chamber music was a focus for Brahms, occupying him steadily from his years as a novice composer to his fullest maturity. His twenty-four completed chamber compositions are the most impressive body of such work from the post-Beethoven era. But when it came to string quartets, for him the Beethoven standard was as daunting as it was for symphonies. As a result, Brahms finally signed off on his first two string quartets (Op. 51, Nos. 1 and 2) in 1873 at the age of forty and premiered only one more in 1876, a week before his first symphony. This may seem even more remarkable when, as a journeyman composer, he wrote twenty exploratory string quartets

and used the manuscripts to paper the walls and ceiling of his apartment!

The opening movement of the second string quartet has playful arabesques in the viola accompaniment softening the serious main theme. Parallel movement of the two violins, a third apart, adds a quality of tonal opulence that is even more enhanced by the viola's triplet figures. You should be able to clearly recognize these themes in the development section.

The Andante moderato is an utterly gorgeous expanse of phrases dreamily revealed, unfurling into expansions of themselves and then, effortlessly, into the phrases of new themes. The flowing lines of the three accompanying instruments softly underscore the wistful violin melody, producing the quiet, lyrical mood. A brief shift of character occupies a central passage of first violin and cello playing a strongly accented melody in canon, after which the spacious calm returns for the movement's conclusion.

Brahms shapes his third movement in the characteristic of a leisurely minuet, even if only *Quasi Minuetto*. Here the main "minuet" is menacing, even ethereal, and the central Trio section is an animated *Allegretto vivace*. When the initial theme returns, listen for an extra intensity provided by clever counterpoint enlivened by rhythmic pulsing figures.

There are two themes in the finale, both based on dance rhythms. The first is Magyar in character: strong and lively. It is in sharp contrast to the sensuously gliding *Ländler* of the second. Listen for how the dancelike character of these themes undergoes a fascinating series of transformations, until a canon between the violin and cello reminds you of their rhythmic beginning.

—notes © Dr. Michael Spencer

65TH SEASON 2021-2022

*Presented in Cooperation with
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American String Quartet

2:30 PM Sunday, October 24, 2021

Faye Spanos Concert Hall

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2:30 PM Sunday, November 14, 2021

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Poulenc Trio

2:30 PM Sunday, February 6, 2022

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Frisson Ensemble

2:30 PM Sunday, February 27, 2022

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2:30 PM Sunday, April 10, 2022

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Quiz Answer: Christmas lights, a candy necklace, and a bead curtain are all string ensembles.

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