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WINTER CONCERTS 2022

Castalian String Quartet

Sunday February 27 2022

From the Artistic Director

Dear Friends:

We are so happy to be back “live” in the concert hall once again, and we are delighted that you are joining us. Thank you for coming.

By a series of coincidences, string quartets have established themselves as place markers in the past two pandemic years of ups and downs. In the final concert in our ill-fated 2019-20 Season, we presented the Schumann Quartet, one of several sibling groups we engaged that season. In October of 2021, we resumed live performances with a wonderful concert at the Orpheum featuring the Danish String Quartet. We managed to squeeze six great concerts into the months of October and November, and then we were shut down again by Omicron.



And here is the Castalian String Quartet to set us off on the right foot as we continue our 2021-22 Season, and we are delighted to welcome its members back to our stage. We had a great time with them when they made their Vancouver debut in September, 2018. Those of you who watched my Beyond the Concert Hall conversation with Daniel Roberts, second violinist of the Quartet, will know how the lockdown affected the Castalians, and how very happy they are to be back on the road again.

We are most grateful to Ric and Lynda Spratley for sponsoring this concert and to the Peak Group of Companies, our Season Sponsor.

I would also like to thank the City of Vancouver for its support, the Government of B.C. and the Government of Canada for their support and help during the pandemic.

And finally, the support of our patrons and donors is our lifeblood. Thank you for sustaining us and enabling us to move through these challenging times and bring you the very best music and musicians we can find.

Enjoy the performance.

Sincerely,

Leila



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Program

PEAK PERFORMANCES AT THE PLAYHOUSE SERIES

Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen (violin)
Daniel Roberts (violin)
Ruth Gibson (viola)
Christopher Graves (cello)

Sunday, February 27, 2022 3:00 pm
Vancouver Playhouse

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)
String Quartet in D minor Op. 76 No. 2
("Fifths")

Allegro
Andante più tosto allegretto
Menuetto. Allegro ma non troppo
Finale. Vivace
(approx. 20 minutes)

FANNY MENDELSSOHN (1805-1847)
String Quartet in E-flat major

Adagio ma non troppo
Allegretto
Romanze
Allegro molto vivace
(approx. 22 minutes)

INTERMISSION

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)
String Quartet in G major D 887

Allegro molto moderato
Andante un poco moto
Scherzo: Allegro vivace
Allegro assai
(approx. 45 minutes)

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Castalian String Quartet

Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen (violin)
Daniel Roberts (violin)
Ruth Gibson (viola)
Christopher Graves (cello)

Early Life & Education: The Castalian String Quartet was formed in 2011, and studied with Oliver Wille (Kuss Quartet) at the Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media. In the decade since its formation, the London-based quartet has distinguished itself as one of the most dynamic, sophisticated young string quartets performing today.



Photo credit: Paul Marc Mitchell

The Quartet's name is derived from the Castalian Spring in the ancient city of Delphi. According to Greek mythology, the nymph Castalia transformed herself into a fountain to evade Apollo's pursuit, thus creating a source of poetic inspiration for all who drink from her waters.

Recently: The Quartet received the Royal Philharmonic Society's 2019 Young Artists Award, and in 2021 was named the inaugural Hans Keller String Quartet in Residence at the Oxford University Faculty of Music. The Quartet received the prestigious inaugural Merito String Quartet Award and Valentin Erben Prize in 2018, and won a coveted Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship Award.

Offstage: When not on stage, Finnish first violinist Sini Simonen can be found hiking in the hills, Welsh second violinist Daniel Roberts follows his beloved Liverpool Football Club, Irish violist Ruth Gibson teaches yoga and English cellist Christopher Graves makes bows. Based in London, the quartet takes immense pleasure in performing for diverse audiences everywhere, from great concert halls to maximum security prisons and even a rainforest.

The Castalian Quartet is represented by David Rowe Artists.

Program Notes

Franz Joseph Haydn String Quartet in D minor Op. 76 No. 2 (“Fifths”)

Haydn is known as the father of the string quartet for his leading role in transforming the genre from its origins as light entertainment into a vehicle for serious composition, worthy of standing beside the instrumental sonata and the orchestral symphony.

His earliest quartets were divertimento-like, comprised of five movements (two of which were minuets) and were written in Rococo style with an eye towards simplicity, grace and elegance. These were carefree works with simple textures and uncomplicated formal designs and were aimed at amateur musicians of moderate ability.

Beginning with Haydn’s Op. 9 quartets of 1770, however, a different type of quartet begins to emerge, laid out in just four movements, each distinct in character and mood. And the transformation is complete with the publication of his Op. 20 quartets in 1772. These are technically demanding works based on the relentless pursuit of motivic development, bristling with learned counterpoint and even fugues. They require players alert to the cross-chatter of lively ensemble playing, in textures that represent, as Goethe was famously to remark, an intelligent conversation between four individuals.

The string quartet had become, in the words of Haydn scholars Floyd and Margaret Grave, “an exemplary genre for connoisseurs”.

* * *

In the six quartets of Op. 76, completed in 1797, we catch Haydn near the end of his career and at the height of his powers, during the period in which he was also composing his oratorio *The Creation*. The second quartet in the set, in D minor, is remarkable for the extreme contrasts of mood that characterize its four movements, which alternate between high seriousness and playful contentment.

The work opens in eyebrow-knitting earnestness with a falling-fifth motive in the 1st violin that gives the quartet its nickname (“Fifths”), accompanied by a hand-wringing patter of anxious 8th notes in the other instruments. These two motivic elements – half-note fifths set against 8th-note

counter-play – will constitute virtually the entire motivic material from which Haydn’s fashions this movement, with the half-note fifth motive playing the leading role throughout. It even chaperones the second theme, meant to contrast with it. It seems to be always in circulation somewhere in the texture, getting passed around between the instruments like a decanter of sherry between gentlemen in dinner jackets smoking cigars. In the development section there is hardly a single bar without this motive in some voice or other, either straight-up, inverted, in stretto, or in diminution. Needless to say, this quartet was aptly named.

The *Andante più tosto allegretto* that follows is a kind of variation movement – but then again, *everything* in Haydn seems to be a “variation” because of his mono-thematic mindset: using the same motives over and over again in different guises throughout a single movement. Here he seems to wink slyly back at the first movement by running its “falling interval” motive into the ground through constant repetition. The melody line features simple falling fifths, filled-in chordal fifths, and fifths filled in with runs. In the end, though, it is the constant tick-tock in the first violin of falling *thirds* that makes the whole movement sound like a kind of grandfather clock, coyly aided and abetted by a dainty pizzicato accompaniment in the other instruments.

This is Haydn’s dry humour at its most arch.

The *Menuetto* is even more eccentric still. Sometimes called the *Hexenmenuett* (Witch’s Minuet), it opens with an austere, bare-bones two-voice canon between upper and lower voices in D minor. This is followed by a trio that begins on a series of repeated notes on the pitch D, sort of implying D minor from the previous section – but no! A lusty full-throated D *major* chord suddenly bursts into our ears in the same repeated-note pattern to resolve the ambiguity.

Haydn is known to have burst out laughing at his own musical jokes when listening to his string quartets performed by others. This movement may well have been one of his real knee-slappers.

Haydn ends this quartet with a short snappy finale which, like many of Haydn’s finales, has a rural dance flavour to it, with drone tones aplenty and the first violin playing village fiddler throughout.

It opens with a bustling little theme that seems to be urgently chasing its own tail but then after 8 bars comically stops dead in its tracks under a goose-egg fermata as if cross-eyed in confusion. The recurring motive of a pick-up 8th note, characteristic of both the first and second themes, provides continuing onward momentum while repeated notes keep the listener's toes tapping and some acrobatic wild leaps in the first violin keep the circus atmosphere alive. This is a movement full of personality and while written in D minor, it actually spends most of its time in the major mode, ending in an exuberant flurry of D major figuration.

Fanny Mendelssohn **String Quartet in E-flat Major**

In her youth Fanny Mendelssohn revealed a musical talent just as precocious as that of her younger brother Felix. Both received the same rigorous musical training: keyboard instruction from pianist Ludwig Berger (1777-1839), a student of Muzio Clementi, and lessons in counterpoint and composition from composer Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832). In 1824, Zelter noted in a letter to his friend Goethe that Fanny, barely 19 years of age, had already composed no less than 32 fugues.

But while Felix might be free to pursue a musical career, Fanny, as the daughter of a well-to-do family of high social standing, was not. Her path in life, according to the social conventions of the time, was to be a wife and mother, a role she fulfilled when in 1829 she married, in a love match, the court painter Wilhelm Hensel (1795-1861). With the support of her husband, though, she continued to compose throughout her life, producing over 125 piano pieces and 250 lieder, as well as various chamber works. But nevertheless, many of her early compositions (including one of Queen Victoria's favourite songs) had to be published under her brother's name, and the vast majority of her almost 450 completed works remained unpublished during her lifetime.

Frau Fanny Hensel née Mendelssohn did, however, have a *private* musical career, continuing to take part in the Sunday musicale concerts that had been held weekly in the Mendelssohn family's elegant Berlin home since 1823 with audiences of up to 200 guests. A list of composers she programmed for these concerts in the period from 1833 until her death from a stroke in 1847 reveals much about her musical ideals and the models

she used in her own compositions. Topping the list were 40 works by her brother, Felix Mendelssohn, followed by Beethoven (38), Bach (16), and Mozart (13). Her admiration for these composers is easily discernible in her String Quartet in E flat major written in 1834, which may well count as the first quartet by a female composer in the Western canon.

* * *

Based on a piano sonata started five years earlier and written largely in the Mendelssohnian style of Romantic-tinged classicism, this four-movement work presents some interesting anomalies. The first of these is the choice of an *Adagio* for its opening movement, a deviation from classical decorum that raised an eyebrow of disapproval in her brother Felix, but which might have been inspired by the example of a similar slow opening movement in Beethoven's late String Quartet in C# minor Op. 131. Similar, also, to this Beethoven quartet movement is the concentrated emphasis on imitative counterpoint, testifying to what the *New Grove Dictionary* refers to as the composer's "Bachian proclivities". The movement unfolds rhapsodically as a free fantasy that ruminates fervently and at length over its opening phrase, a downward melodic gesture ending with a sigh motive.

The *Allegretto* that follows is very much in the vein of her brother's *Midsummer Night's Dream* scherzo: fleet and acrobatic, but with a scurrying middle-section fugato like the scherzo from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

The third-movement *Romanze* is the emotional heart of the quartet, remarkable for its extraordinarily wide expressive range and creepy-crawly chromatic harmonies. It begins tenderly with a gently pulsing carpet of repeated notes that blossoms into a shy, wistful and slightly plaintive melody of small range contrasted immediately after with wide melodic leaps reminiscent of the two-voice single-line melodies found in Bach. These simple thematic elements, however, soon don their Wellington boots to huff and puff through a heavy developmental section of churning 16th-note passages echoing with passionate intensity through tonal space until the demure mood of the opening returns to close the movement as it began.

Now it is at just this point in the proceedings that listeners with perfect pitch might start to wonder just where the "E flat" in this "String Quartet in E flat" was planning on making an appearance,

because up to this point the work seems to be spending almost all of its time anywhere *but* in E flat major. In fact Felix Mendelssohn noted in a letter to his sister that the first two movements are “not in any particular key” whatsoever and was all “Don’t get me started” when discussing the key scheme of the third movement.

We can feel confident, however, that his worst fears were allayed by the rock-solid harmonic foundation on which his sister constructed the concluding movement. This finale is in a regular-as-rain sonata form with an exposition moving from a tonic E flat to its dominant, a massive development section with no awkward surprises, and a small but tidy little recapitulation to tie a neat formal bow around the whole package. The reason for this sudden falling-in-line on the harmonic front is that the expressive effect of the movement has little to do with its harmonic design but is predicated entirely on its unstoppable forward momentum.

It opens with a flurry of whirlwind figuration, derived perhaps from the *Presto* finale of Felix’s Fantasy in F# Op. 28, or possibly inspired by the finale of Mozart’s Sonata in F major K. 332. And the 16th-note motion initiated at the outset rarely stops to catch its breath throughout, even acting as a kind of Peloton running strip underneath the more lyrical second theme. The development section features some impassioned Beethovenian counterpoint between starkly contrasting thematic ideas and the whole movement goes by like a blur.

Franz Schubert **String Quartet in G major D 887**

When faced with a string quartet lasting two full periods of National League hockey, one inevitably wonders whether Schubert’s mimeographic profusion of ideas should be qualified as “heavenly length” or “earthy tedium”. The man *does* seem to go on, and on, and on.

No less a scholarly titan than German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus has proposed that Schubert operates according to a different sense of psychological time. Some of his colleagues stress the trance-like quality of Schubert’s musical thinking, likening him to a musical somnambulist who bids us enter an enchanted world of dreams and night-wandering. Others, while encouraged by how much sleep Schubert seems to be getting, bemoan nevertheless the way in which his practice of “open-ended variation” betrays the tradition of

concise formal argument established by Mozart and Haydn, and deflates the expectation of propulsive forward drive created by Beethoven.

Fortunately, Schubert’s String Quartet in G major—his last, written in 1826—silences all critics, rendering moot their musings as to whether it is Schubert, or his listeners, who have the greater claim to the ministrations of Morpheus.

This quartet is an arresting work that, for all its length, constantly engages the listener directly and viscerally. It is an ambitious quartet that lives in an enlarged sound world of symphonic dimensions, particularly orchestral in its use of *tremolo*, and replete with *tutti* quadruple stops that add an aggressive edge to its musical rhetoric.

Schubert lays on the tremolo with a liberal hand, either to beef up the ‘sound-weight’ of the instruments into an imitation of an orchestral *tutti*, to add a touch of hushed tenderness or an air of deepening mystery, or simply to render long-held notes more sonically pliable and expand their range of expressive effect. Equally ear-catching are the many sudden dramatic changes in dynamics (a Beethoven trademark) and the acrobatic pitch range within which the instruments sometimes move at rocket speed.

The first movement *Allegro molto moderato* opens with a major chord that swells in sound over two bars to emerge shockingly like a primal scream—in the minor! No lack of drama here. What follows combines the emphatic pomp of a Baroque French overture with the suspenseful ‘hinting-at-things-to-come’ of a sonata movement’s slow introduction. The first theme, when it arrives, mixes great leaps with jagged dotted rhythms over a slowly descending bass-line, continuing the tone of epic grandeur announced at the outset. The lilting second theme could not be more contrasting. Shy and intimate in mood, it rocks back and forth within the smallest possible range, doing everything it can to de-emphasize the first beat of the bar. While the development section is tumultuous and intense, the movement’s two themes start duking it out long before that, interrupting each other, even in the exposition, in a continuous alternation of tranquil lilt and surging protest that plays out through the movement in the flickering shadows of frequent changes between major and minor modes.

The *Andante un poco moto* is charged with mystery and suspense. It begins innocently enough with the cello singing out a simple

hummable tune in its tenor register. This is a melody that proceeds at a drowsy 'sleepwalking' pace, its eerie stillness reinforced by gentle reminders in the accompaniment of its opening melodic leap and by the stabilizing presence of pedal tones in the harmony. But ever and again it plunges into high drama when the jagged dotted rhythms of the first movement return, unleashing 'horror-film' tremolos that vibrate with a sense of fear and foreboding. These two moods – the eerie dream and the nightmare – alternate throughout the movement until the night-wandering melody ends up back under the covers in the warm embrace of a major chord in its final bars.

The *Allegro vivace* scherzo that follows goes off like an alarm clock with volleys of rapid-fire repeated notes that vibrate with nervous energy

in the minor mode, ricocheting through every register of the quartet's range until relieved by the calming entrance of the central Trio section, a slow gentle Viennese waltz with a rustic drone in the bass.

High-contrast drama, often verging on comedy, returns in the *Allegro assai* finale, a perpetual-motion sonata-rondo of kaleidoscopic moods. It opens with a hearty foot-stomping, knee-slapping tarantella theme with a type of gypsy-style merriment characterized by quicksilver changes between major and minor tone colourings. And its second theme is an utterly outrageous parody of a Rossini patter aria.

Schubert, too long you say? This is one Schubert movement that is so much fun, you wish it would go on forever.

Donald G. Gíslason 2022

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Presenting exceptional artists is made possible by the generosity of our supporters, who make the journey with us throughout the year.

COVID-19 has changed a great many things about the way in which we move through the world and interact with one another. Over the last 20 months, our supporters have sustained us in ways that we couldn't have imagined, and never have we been more grateful.

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