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CHIAROSCURO QUARTET

Alina Ibragimova | Violin
Pablo Hernán Benedí | Violin

Emilie Hörnlund | Viola
Claire Thirion | Cello

Saturday, April 1, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

SCHUBERT

Quartettsatz in C Minor, D.703

BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in F Minor, Opus 95 "Serioso"

Allegro con brio

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Larghetto espressivo; Allegretto agitato

INTERMISSION

MENDELSSOHN

String Quartet in A Minor, Opus 13

Adagio; Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto

Presto

This program is made possible in part by the generous support of Jeanne Newman

Chiaroscuro Quartet is represented by Askonas Holt Limited
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ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the San Francisco debut of Chiaroscuro Quartet. Alina Ibragimova made her SF Performances debut in April 2012 and has returned for two more recitals.

Formed in 2005, **Chiaroscuro Quartet** comprises violinists Alina Ibragimova (Russia) and Pablo Hernán Benedí (Spain), the Swedish violist Emilie Hörnlund, and cellist Claire Thirion from France. Dubbed “a trailblazer for the authentic performance of High Classical chamber music” in *Gramophone*, this international ensemble performs music of the Classical and early Romantic periods on gut strings and with historical bows. The quartet’s unique sound—described in *The Observer* as “a shock to the ears of the best kind”—is highly acclaimed by audiences and critics all over Europe.

Their growing discography includes recordings of music by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Haydn. Recent releases include Schubert String Quartets (No. 14 in D minor “Death and the Maiden” D. 810 and No. 9 in G minor D. 173) and Haydn Op.76. Future releases include Beethoven Op.18 and Mozart “Prussian” Quartets.

Chiaroscuro Quartet was a prize-winner of the German Förderpreis Deutschlandfunk/Musikfest Bremen in 2013 and received Germany’s most prestigious CD award, the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik in 2015 for their recording of Mozart’s *Quartet in D Minor, K. 421* and Mendelssohn’s *Second String Quartet in A Minor*,

Op. 13. Among the ensemble’s chamber music partners are renowned artists such as Kristian Bezuidenhout, Trevor Pinnock, Jonathan Cohen, Cédric Tiberghien, Nicolas Baldeyrou, Chen Halevi, Malcolm Bilson, Christian Poltera, and Christophe Coin.

Recent engagements included their enthusiastically received debut concerts at Vienna Konzerthaus and Philharmonie Warsaw, their debut at Carnegie Hall as part of their first US tour and a return visit to Japan. Other highlights have taken the ensemble to the Edinburgh International Festival, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, London’s Wigmore Hall and King’s Place, Auditorio Nacional de Música Madrid, The Sage Gateshead, Auditorium du Louvre Paris, Théâtre du Jeu-de-Paume in Aix-en-Provence, Grand Théâtre de Dijon, Gulbenkian Foundation Lisbon, Boulez Saal, and Beethoven Haus Bonn. They have been artist-in-residence in Port-Royal-des-Champs since 2009, with a concert series dedicated to the string quartets of Mozart.

In the 2022–23 season they continue their residency at Turner Sims Concert Hall, make return visits to London’s Wigmore Hall and Berlin’s Boulez Saal, as well as a return tour of North America including Jordan Hall Boston, Princeton, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Montreal’s Bourgie Hall.

Chiaroscuro Quartet are grateful to Jumpstart Jr Foundation for the kind loan of the 1570 Andrea Amati violin.

PROGRAM NOTES

Quartettsatz in C Minor, D.703

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797–1828)

Schubert composed the *Quartettsatz*—that title, which did not originate with Schubert, means simply “quartet movement”—in December 1820, when he was just a few weeks short of his twenty-fourth birthday. He had apparently planned to write a standard four-movement quartet but completed only the first movement and a 41-measure fragment of what would have been an *Andante* second movement. No one knows why he set so promising a work aside and left it unfinished, but—like the “*Unfinished*” *Symphony*—what survives is significant enough by itself to stand as a satisfying whole.

Curiously, the *Allegro assai* opening movement of this quartet is similar to the first movement of the “*Unfinished*” *Symphony*: both feature the same sort of double-stroked opening idea in the first violins, both are built on unusually lyric ideas, and both offer unexpected key relations between the major theme-groups. In fact, the key relationships are one of the most remarkable aspects of the quartet: it begins in C minor with the first violin’s racing, nervous theme, and this quickly gives way to the lyric second idea in A-flat major, which Schubert marks *dolce*. The quiet third theme—a rocking, flowing melody—arrives in G major. As one expects in Schubert’s mature music (and the 23-year-old who wrote this music was a mature composer), keys change with consummate ease, though one surprise is that the opening idea does not reappear until the coda, where it returns in the closing instants to hurl the movement to its fierce conclusion.

Listed as the twelfth of Schubert’s fifteen string quartets, the *Quartettsatz* is generally acknowledged as the first of his mature quartets. The first eleven had been written as *Hausmusik* for a quartet made up of members of Schubert’s own family: his brothers played the violins, his father the cello, and the composer the viola. Because he was writing for amateur musicians in those quartets, Schubert had kept the demands on the players relatively light—his cellist-father in particular was given a fairly easy part in those quartets. But in the *Quartettsatz* and the three magnificent final quartets Schubert felt no such restrictions. The *Quartettsatz*, which makes enormous

technical demands (including virtuoso runs for the first violin that whip upward over a span of three octaves), was clearly intended for professional performers.

String Quartet in F Minor, Opus 95 “Serioso”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

Beethoven’s manuscript for the *Quartet in F Minor* is dated October 1810, but almost certainly he continued to work on this quartet for some years after that, and it was not published until 1816. This quartet has a nickname, “*Quartetto Serioso*,” that—unusually for a musical nickname—came from the composer himself. Well aware of the music’s extraordinary character, Beethoven described the quartet as having been “written for a small circle of connoisseurs and... never to be performed in public.” Joseph Kerman has described it as “an involved, impassioned, highly idiosyncratic piece, problematic in every one of its movements, advanced in a hundred ways” and “unmatched in Beethoven’s output for compression, exaggerated articulation, and a corresponding sense of extreme tension.” Yet this same quartet—virtually the shortest of Beethoven’s string quartets—comes from the same period as the easily accessible “*Archduke*” Trio, the *Seventh* and *Eighth Symphonies*, and the incidental music to Goethe’s *Egmont*, and this music’s extraordinary focus and tension seem sharply at odds with those scores. In fact, this quartet in many ways prefigures Beethoven’s late style and the great cycle of quartets written during his final years.

The first movement is extraordinarily compressed (it lasts barely four minutes), and it catapults listeners through an unexpected series of key relationships. The unison opening figure is almost spit out, passing through and ending in a “wrong” key and then followed by complete silence. Octave leaps and furious restatements of the opening figure lead to the swaying second subject, announced in flowing triplets by the viola. The development section of this (highly modified) sonata-form movement is quite short, treating only the opening theme, before the movement exhausts itself on fragments of that theme.

The marking of the second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, might seem to suggest some relief, but this movement is even more closely argued than the first. The cello’s strange descending line introduces a lovely opening melody, but this quickly

gives way to a long and complex fugue, its sinuous subject announced by the viola and then taken up and developed by the other voices. A quiet close (derived from the cello’s introduction) links this movement to the third, a violent fast movement marked *Allegro assai vivace ma serioso*. The movement is in ABABA form, the explosive opening section alternating with a chorale-like subject for the lower three voices which the first violin decorates. Once again, Beethoven takes each section into unexpected keys. The last movement has a slow introduction—*Larghetto espressivo*—full of the darkness that has marked the first three movements, and this leads to a blistering finale that does much to dispel the tension. In an oft-quoted remark about the arrival of this theme, American composer Randall Thompson is reported to have said: “No bottle of champagne was ever uncorked at a better moment.” In contrast, for example, to the near-contemporary *Seventh Symphony*, which ends in wild celebration, this quartet has an almost consciously anti-heroic close, concluding with a very fast coda that Beethoven marks simply *Allegro*.

Some have felt that the *Quartet in F Minor* is composed with the same technique as the late quartets but without their sense of spiritual elevation, and in this sense they see the present quartet as looking ahead toward Beethoven’s late style. But it is unfair to this music to regard it simply as a forerunner of another style. This quartet may well be dark, explosive, and extremely concentrated. But it should be valued for just those qualities.

String Quartet in A Minor, Opus 13

FELIX MENDELSSOHN
(1809–1847)

Mendelssohn turned 18 early in 1827, a year that was important for many reasons. Already the composer of two masterpieces—the *Octet* (1825) and the *Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1826)—Mendelssohn spent the summer on a walking tour of the Harz Mountains in central Germany and in the fall entered the University of Berlin, where he attended Hegel’s lectures. One other event from 1827 had a profound effect on the young composer: Beethoven died on March 26.

Mendelssohn never met Beethoven—he had grown up in northern German cities, far from Vienna where Beethoven lived the final 35 years of his life. But the young composer regarded Beethoven as a god. In

the fall of 1827, only months after Beethoven’s death, Mendelssohn wrote his *String Quartet in A Minor*. This quartet seems obsessed by the Beethoven quartets, both in theme-shape and musical gesture, and countless listeners have wondered about the significance of these many references.

The *Quartet in A Minor* opens with a slow introduction. This *Adagio*, which evokes memories of Beethoven’s *Quartet in A Minor, Opus 132*, also quotes one of Mendelssohn’s own early love-songs, “*Ist es wahr?*” and that song’s principal three-note phrase figures importantly in the first movement. The music leaps ahead at the *Allegro vivace*, and Mendelssohn’s instructions to the players indicate the spirit of this music: *agitato* and *con fuoco*. The second movement also begins with a slow introduction, an *Adagio* that has reminded some of the *Cavatina* movement of Beethoven’s *String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130*; the main body of the movement is fugal, based on a subject that appears to be derived from Beethoven’s *String Quartet in F Minor, Opus 95*.

The charming *Intermezzo* is the one “non-Beethoven” movement in the quartet. In ABA form, it opens with a lovely violin melody over pizzicato accompaniment from the other voices; the center section (*Allegro di molto*) is one of Mendelssohn’s fleet scherzos, and he combines the movement’s principal themes as he brings it to a graceful close. The sonata-form finale opens with a stormy recitative for first violin that was clearly inspired by the recitative that prefaces the finale of Beethoven’s *String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 127*. Not only does Mendelssohn evoke the memory of several Beethoven quartets in this finale, but at the very end he brings back quotations from this quartet’s earlier movements: the fugue subject from the second movement is heard briefly, and the quartet ends with the heartfelt music that opened the first movement.

What are we to make of the many references to Beethoven’s late quartets in this quartet by the teenaged Mendelssohn? Are they slavish imitation? The effort of a young man to take on the manner of an older master? An act of homage? There may be no satisfactory answers to these questions, but Mendelssohn’s *Quartet in A Minor*—the work of an extremely talented young man still finding his way as a composer—is accomplished music in its own right: graceful, skillfully made, and finally very pleasing.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger