SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

DANISH STRING QUARTET

Frederik Øland | Violin
Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen | Violin
Asbjørn Nørgaard | Viola
Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin | Cello

Wednesday, October 26, 2022 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

MOZART — **Divertimento in F Major, K.138**
[Allegro]
Andante
Presto

BRITTEN — **Three Divertimenti for String Quartet**
Alla Marcia
Waltz
Burlesque

MOZART — **String Quartet in E-flat Major, K.428**
Allegro non troppo
Andante con moto
Menuetto: Allegro
Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

SCHUMANN — **String Quartet in A Major, Opus 41, No. 3**
Andante espressivo; Allegro molto moderato
Assai agitato; un poco Adagio
Adagio molto
Finale. Allegro molto vivace—Quasi Trio

The **Danish String Quartet** is exclusively represented by Kirshbaum Associates Inc.
307 Seventh Avenue, Suite 506, New York, NY 10001 kirshbaumassociates.com

The **Danish String Quartet** is currently exclusive with ECM Records and has previously recorded for DaCapo and Cavi-Music/BR Klassik.

ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the Danish String Quartet for the second time. The quartet made its SF Performances debut in February 2018.

Among today's many exceptional chamber music groups, the Grammy®-nominated Danish String Quartet, celebrating its 20th Anniversary this season, continuously asserts its preeminence. The Quartet's playing reflects impeccable musicianship, sophisticated artistry, exquisite clarity of ensemble, and, above all, an expressivity inextricably bound to the music. They are the recipients of many awards and prestigious appointments, including *Musical America's* 2020 Ensemble of the Year and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. The Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to The Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two).

This season, the Danish String Quartet continues its *Doppelgänger* series, an ambitious four-year international commissioning project. *Doppelgänger* pairs world premieres from four renowned composers—Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès—with four major works from the masterful chamber music repertoire of Schubert. This season's new work, by Anna Thorvaldsdottir, premieres in April 2023 and is paired with Schubert's *String Quartet in A Minor, "Rosamunde."* The *Doppelgänger* pieces are commissioned by the Danish String Quartet with the support of Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances, UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, Vancouver Recital Society, Flagey in Brussels, and Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam.

In addition to performances of *Doppelgänger*, the Danish String Quartet gives more than 20 performances around North America this season; European highlights include three concerts at Wigmore Hall as Artists in Residence.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played soccer and made music together. As teenagers, they began the study of classical chamber music and were mentored by Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008, the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. *danishquartet.com*.

PROGRAM NOTES

Divertimento in F Major, K.138

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(1756–1791)

Mozart wrote three "divertimenti" for strings, K.136-8, in Salzburg in 1772, but a certain amount of mystery continues to surround this music. The designation "Divertimenti" in the manuscript is not in Mozart's hand, and these three pieces lack the minuet movements characteristic of the divertimento form. Even the size of the instrumental forces Mozart had in mind is unclear: though scored for four string instruments, these works may be played by either quartet or string orchestra.

Mozart biographer Alfred Einstein has suggested that these three works, composed after Mozart's second trip to Italy, may have been written for use during his third Italian tour late in 1772 and that the simple addition of horns and oboes would transform these quartet-like works into symphonies on the three-movement Italian model. And so Mozart may have extracted double service from these three pieces: as divertimentos for string quartet in Salzburg and as potential symphonies intended for the court of Milan, where he had been feted during previous tours. The uncertainty about the form of these works has led to their being classified variously (and erroneously) as the "Salzburg symphonies" and "quartet-symphonies."

The last of the three, *Divertimento in F Major, K.138*, is a jewel: a fully-formed string symphony only nine minutes long. In its grand gestures and rich sonorities, this music certainly sounds symphonic. The sonata-form opening movement (Mozart left no tempo indication) opens with a two-part theme—the powerful opening figure and its soft "answer"—followed by a flowing main idea announced and decorated by the two violins. This is followed by a moving *Andante*, in which the 16-year-old composer offers music with haunting lyric lines that foreshadow the great slow movements of his final years. The *Presto* is a sparkling rondo, complete with two contrasting episodes—the chirping second a pure delight—and a coda. This polished finale sizzles past in one hundred seconds.

String Quartet in E-flat Major, K.428

Mozart's arrival in Vienna opened up glistening new vistas for him, and one of the most important of these was the example of Haydn's string quartets. Though Mozart had already written 13 string quartets when he left Salzburg, all of these had been completed by the early 1770s (when he was 17) and still showed resemblances to the divertimento form from which the quartet had evolved. The effect of Haydn's most recent quartets on Mozart was stunning, and he quickly set out to write a cycle of six new quartets of his own.

Under Haydn's hands, the quartet had evolved from its early role as genteel entertainment music (background music for court functions) into a great musical form.

From Haydn, Mozart learned to democratize the voices, giving all four players individual roles in what had become a complex and expressive music drama. Usually the fastest of workers, Mozart labored long and hard over these six quartets. It took him well over two years to complete the cycle, and he went back and revised each of them carefully, which suggests that he took this music quite seriously. In his dedication of the six quartets to Haydn, Mozart confessed that they were "the fruit of long and laborious toil."

Mozart composed the *Quartet in E-flat Major* between June and July of 1783. Externally, the four movements seem normal enough, though the glory of this music (as with all Mozart's music) lies in the transformation of just those very normal forms. The *Allegro non troppo* opens with a calm unison theme-shape that will recur in a variety of forms. The second subject—full of dots, turns, and triplets—feels unusually busy after the subdued opening, and Mozart then treats both themes in a concise development that features the smooth interplay of all four voices. The *Andante con moto*, nominally in the key of A-flat major, proceeds solemnly over the constant pulse of its 6/8 meter. As it continues, this movement wanders so far from the tonality suggested by its key signature that some have been tempted to make out prefigurations here of *Tristan*, still 76 years in the future. It is a movement like this that makes us understand how one early reviewer could complain that this music was "too highly spiced."

The *Menuetto* offers another reminiscence of Haydn: its opening gesture seems to recall the minuet of Haydn's Opus 33, No. 2, also in E-flat major. The most distinctive feature of this movement is its trio, which turns unexpectedly dark: Mozart moves to G minor here, and the music is haunted by the chromatic winding of its themes before leaping back brightly to the minuet section. The concluding *Allegro vivace* is aptly named—it is a blistering rondo built on the bobbing, murmuring idea that opens the movement. Mozart may have learned from Haydn the importance of liberating all four voices in a string quartet, but this movement makes unusual demands on the first violinist—the writing here demands a virtuoso player, who is sent hurtling across the range of that instrument.

Three Divertimenti for String Quartet

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
(1913–1976)

Benjamin Britten entered the Royal College of Music in 1930 at the age of almost 17. It was not a happy match. Carefully trained during his early private lessons with Frank Bridge, Britten found composition instruction from John Ireland impossibly conservative. Soon he wanted to go to Vienna to study with Alban Berg, though that plan was blocked by his family. While at the college, Britten wrote for string quartet. In his first year there he composed a quartet (it would not be performed until 1975, the year before his death), and at the same time he began another, more ambitious work for string quartet. This was to be in five short movements and for it, Britten borrowed an idea from Sir Edward Elgar, another English composer the young man considered hopelessly conservative. In his *Enigma Variations* of 1899, Elgar had made each variation a portrait of one of his friends, and now young Britten took up that same general idea: each movement of the new quartet would depict one of his friends from schoolboy days. Britten tentatively titled the new work *Alla Quartetto Serioso* and gave it a subtitle from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: "Go play, boy, play."

But the piece gave the young composer a great deal of trouble, and he was able to draft only three of its projected five movements. These were performed on December 11, 1933, just a few weeks after the composer's twentieth birthday. Britten's biographer Humphrey Carpenter recounts that the composer was so dissatisfied with his own music that he walked out of the hall without saying a word, neglecting to thank the performers for their efforts. Britten revised the score over the next few years, but when a performance in February 1936 brought negative reviews, he lost interest in the project. He never returned to this music, nor did he give it an opus number, but his manuscript survived and was published in 1983 under the title *Three Divertimenti*. These three short pieces may not be an "official" part of Britten's catalog of works, but they offer an early example of his writing for string quartet, a medium that would become more important to him later in his career.

Britten titled the first movement *Alla Marcia* and gave it the subtitle "PT" (physical training). This movement, a portrait of his athletic friend David Layton, is the most technically "advanced" of the three—it was heavily revised after the original performance, and the writing now is full of glissandos and harmonics. The name of the dedicatee of *Waltz* has not survived; Britten's original title for this movement was "At the Party." The energetic *Burlesque* (originally titled "Ragging") is dedicated to his friend Francis Barton. Rhythmically, this is the most complex of the three movements.

String Quartet in A Major, Opus 41, No. 3

ROBERT SCHUMANN
(1810–1856)

During the winter of 1842, Schumann had begun to think about composing string quartets. His wife Clara was gone on a month-long concert tour to Copenhagen in April, and though he suffered an anxiety attack in her absence Schumann used that time to study the quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. His wife's return to Leipzig restored the composer's spirits, and he quickly composed the three string quartets of his Opus 41 in June and July of that year; later that summer he wrote his *Piano Quartet* and *Piano Quintet*. Writing string quartets presented special problems for the pianist-composer. The string quartets are his only chamber works without piano, and—cut off from the familiar resources of his own instrument—he struggled to write just for strings. Though he returned to writing chamber music later in his career, Schumann never again wrote a string quartet.

The *Quartet in A Major*, composed quickly between July 8 and 22, is regarded as the finest of the set and shows many of those original touches that mark Schumann's best music. The first movement opens with a very brief (seven-measure) slow introduction marked *Andante espressivo*. The first violin's falling fifth at the very beginning will become the thematic "seed" for much of the movement: that same falling fifth opens the main theme at the *Allegro molto moderato* and also appears as part of the second subject, introduced by the cello over syncopated accompaniment. Schumann's markings for these two themes suggest the character of the movement: *sempre teneramente* ("always tenderly") and *espressivo*. Schumann's procedures in this movement are a little unusual: the development treats only the first theme, and the second does not reappear until the recapitulation. The

movement fades into silence on the cello's *pianissimo* falling fifth.

The second movement brings more originality. Marked *Assai agitato* ("Very agitated"), it is a theme-and-variation movement, but with a difference: it begins cryptically—with an off-the-beat main idea in 3/8 meter—and only after three variations does Schumann present the actual theme, now marked *Un poco Adagio*. A further variation and flowing coda bring the movement to a quiet close. The *Adagio molto* opens peacefully with the soaring main idea in the first violin. More insistent secondary material arrives over dotted rhythms, and the music grows harmonically complex before pulsing dotted rhythms draw the movement to a close.

Out of the quiet, the rondo-finale bursts to life with a main idea so vigorous that it borders on the aggressive. This is an unusually long movement. Contrasting interludes (including a lovely, Bach-like gavotte) provide relief along the way, but the insistent dotted rhythms of the rondo tune always return to pound their way into a listener's consciousness and finally to propel the quartet to its exuberant close.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger