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EMERSON STRING QUARTET

Eugene Drucker | Violin
Philip Setzer | Violin

Lawrence Dutton | Viola
Paul Watkins | Cello

Friday, April 14, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

PURCELL

(arr. BRITTEN)

Chacony in G Minor

HAYDN

String Quartet in G Major, Opus 33, No. 5

Vivace assai
Largo e cantabile
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Allegretto

MOZART

String Quartet in D Minor, K.421

Allegro moderato
Andante
Menuetto: Allegretto
Allegretto ma non troppo

INTERMISSION

BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in E Minor, Opus 59, No. 2

Allegro
Molto adagio
Allegretto
Presto

This program is made possible in part by the generous support of Bruce and Carolyn Lowenthal

The Emerson String Quartet is represented by IMG Artists
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ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the Emerson String Quartet for the eighth time. The Quartet made its SF Performances debut in January 1986.

The **Emerson String Quartet** will have its final season of concerts in 2022–23, disbanding after more than four decades as one of the world’s premier chamber music ensembles. The Quartet has made more than 30 acclaimed recordings, and has been honored with nine Grammys®, three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, and Musical America’s “Ensemble of the Year” award. As part of their larger mission to keep the string quartet form alive and relevant, they have commissioned and premiered works from some of today’s most esteemed composers.

In its final season, the Quartet will give farewell performances worldwide including San Francisco’s Herbst Theatre, Chicago’s Orchestra Hall, Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music, Vienna’s Musikverein, Prague’s Rudolfinum, London’s Southbank Centre, and more, before coming home to New York City for its final series with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, in a trio of programs entitled *Emerson Dimensions* where the Quartet will perform some of its most storied repertoire. They will give several performances of André Previn’s *Penelope* with Renée Fleming and Uma Thurman, including at the Los Angeles Opera, and they will appear at Carnegie Hall with Evgeny Kissin to perform the

Dvořák Quintet. Their final performance will take place in October 2023 in New York City and will be filmed for a planned documentary by filmmaker Tristan Cook.

The Quartet’s extensive discography includes the complete string quartets of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartók, Webern, and Shostakovich, as well as multi-CD sets of the major works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Dvořák. In its final season, the Quartet will record Schoenberg’s *Second Quartet* with Barbara Hannigan for release in 2023, with the sessions video documented by Mathieu Amalric for a short film. Deutsche Grammophon will also reissue its box set of the Emerson Complete Recordings on the label, with two new additions.

Formed in 1976 and based in New York City, the Emerson was one of the first quartets whose violinists alternate in the first violin position. The Quartet, which takes its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, balances busy performing careers with a commitment to teaching, and serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University. In 2013, cellist Paul Watkins—a distinguished soloist, award-winning conductor, and devoted chamber musician—joined the original members of the Quartet to form today’s group.

In January of 2015, the Quartet received the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, Chamber Music America’s highest honor, in recognition of its significant and lasting contribution to the chamber music field.

PROGRAM NOTES

Chacony in G Minor (arr. Britten)

HENRY PURCELL
(1659–1695)

Henry Purcell is considered the first of England’s great composers. Born into a musical family, he sang in the Chapel Royal as a boy, became “composer to the King’s violins” at age 18, and was named the organist at Westminster Abbey in 1679, a position he held until his death in 1695 at the age of 36. A prolific composer, he wrote church music, coronation anthems, incidental music for London theatrical productions, and a large number of songs, instrumental compositions, and keyboard pieces. His one opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, written for an amateur production at a girls’ school in 1689, is regarded as the first great English opera.

Purcell’s *Chaconne in G Minor* (or *Chacony*, as Purcell spelled it) dates from the 1680s, or roughly from the same time as Bach’s birth. Originally published as the sixth of Purcell’s *Ten Sonatas in Four Parts*, this music is not a sonata in the classical sense (during this period “sonata” meant “sounded” and could refer to any purely instrumental composition). The “four parts” here are first and second violins, viola, and a bass line that might consist of harpsichord, cello, and double bass.

At this concert the *Chacony* is performed in an edition for string orchestra that Benjamin Britten prepared in 1948 and revised in 1963. This brief and impassioned work is in fact a strict chaconne, built on a set of variations over a repeating eight-bar ground bass; recent scholarship suggests that Purcell derived this bass line from the song *Scocca Pur* by his friend, the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Draghi. This ground bass is announced firmly at the beginning and repeats throughout. Above this chordal progression, Purcell gives the higher string voices a sequence of variations remarkable for their invention and their emotional power—this is quite intense music. Purcell also stretches the harmonic language, so that while the *Chacony* stays in G minor, it often implies G major, with a great deal of resulting harmonic ambiguity.

String Quartet in G Major, Opus 33, No. 5

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
(1732–1809)

Haydn composed the six quartets that make up his Opus 33 in the fall of 1781. He had written no quartets for ten years, and now—as he neared his fiftieth birthday—he returned to the form and completed the set that December, advertising them to potential subscribers as having been written in “an entirely new and special way.” Exactly what he meant by this has been the source of debate, and some critics have suggested that this claim may have been a mere sales pitch. Yet these quartets do show certain features new to Haydn’s quartet-writing: greater thematic unity within movements, the replacement of minuet movements by scherzos (in fact, the set was at one time nicknamed *Gli Scherzi*: “The Scherzos”) and increasing use of rondo and variation forms. When Haydn composed these quartets, he was giving lessons to Maria Fyodorovna, wife of the Russian Grand Duke Paul, who later became Czar Paul II. Some of these quartets were apparently played in the presence of that couple in Vienna on Christmas Day 1781, and Haydn dedicated the set to the Grand Duke. As a result, the Opus 33 quartets are sometimes referred to as the “Russian” Quartets, although this is a misleading nickname, for there is nothing remotely Russian about this music.

Though it was published as the fifth of the set, the *Quartet in G Major* appears to have been the first to be written, and it shows many of the characteristics that make the Opus 33 quartets seem “new and special.” It begins with an unusually fast movement (Haydn’s marking is *Vivace assai*), but the mood is gracious as the fertile opening idea is announced *pianissimo* and grows louder only as it repeats. This opening figure will give shape to much of the movement, though Haydn does offer a smooth and singing second subject as part of the sonata-form structure. At the close, the music falls away to conclude on quiet fragments of its opening phrase.

The *Largo e cantabile*, which moves to G minor, has something of the character of an aria from an opera, with the first violin taking the soaring soprano part over throbbing accompaniment from the other voices. This movement is a miniature music-drama, with the solo violin part growing quite florid at points and rising as high as B-flat. The *Scherzo*, full of nice rhythmic point, is formally indistinguishable from the minu-

et-and-trio, though here it is at a faster tempo than that courtly dance—Haydn’s marking is *Allegro*. Haydn returns to G major for this movement, which makes deft use of silences, both with fermatas and with rests.

The finale is in variation form, with a main theme that dances nimbly along a dotted 6/8 meter—Haydn takes care to mark it *staccato* and to write in all the dots on the theme’s first appearance. The variations are graceful and easy to follow, and at the end Haydn gets rid of the dotted rhythms, squares off his theme, and has it speed to the close as a *Presto*.

Mozart, who had just moved to Vienna when Haydn composed the Opus 33 quartets, was clearly aware of them. The finale of his own *Quartet in D Minor*, K.421 is modeled directly on the finale of the *Quartet in G Major*: the main themes are nearly identical, and both movements are in variation form. Mozart dedicated the set that included this quartet to Haydn, and the use of this theme is a further compliment to the older composer.

String Quartet in D Minor, K.421

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
(1756–1791)

Mozart’s move to Vienna in 1781 opened new musical vistas for him, and these must have seemed all the more exciting after so many years in provincial Salzburg. Among the attractions of his adopted city were the string quartets of Haydn, whose Opus 33 quartets were published in Vienna in 1782. Mozart had written no string quartets since 1773, but now—impressed by what Haydn had achieved with this most demanding of forms—Mozart wrote a set of six quartets and dedicated them to Haydn. In that dedication, Mozart noted that these quartets were the product of “long and laborious study,” and there is evidence that Mozart—usually a fast worker—took a long time indeed with these quartets, revising each carefully.

It is a magnificent cycle. Each of the six is distinctive in its own way, and certain moments stay to haunt the mind: the fugal finale of K.387, which looks ahead to the “*Jupiter*” *Symphony*; K.464, which so impressed Beethoven that he modeled one of his own quartets on it; and K.465, the “*Dissonant*,” with its enigmatic beginning. Yet even in such distinguished company, the *Quartet in D Minor*, K.421, composed in June 1783, stands out as radically different. The only one of the cycle in a minor key, it is one of the most serious and powerful works that

Mozart ever wrote. A minor-key quartet was not by itself unusual, and Haydn (who usually published his quartets in groups of six) would often include one minor-key quartet in a set. But no Haydn quartet—great a master as he was of that form—ever matched the expressive power of Mozart’s *Quartet in D Minor*. Individual keys had specific meanings for Mozart, and D minor, the key of the *Piano Concerto No. 20* and of the *Requiem*, was the key he sometimes associated with revenge in his operas. This quartet is by no means program music, but the mood here partakes of that dark spirit—this is somber and unrelenting music.

The *Allegro moderato* opens with the first violin’s falling octave on D, and there follows a long and intense melody—marked *sotto voce*—for that instrument over unobtrusive accompaniment from the other voices. A more flowing second subject makes brief appearances, but the dark first theme dominates this movement. Mozart asks for the standard exposition retreat, but then offers performers the opportunity to repeat the entire development. The recapitulation continues to develop the movement’s material, and finally the cello leads the way into the brief coda with a dark and expressive idea of its own.

The *Andante*, in F major, affords relief with its gentle main theme. Mozart had originally intended a somewhat simpler melodic idea here; his manuscript shows that he recognized the limits of that theme and replaced it. While this is not a variation movement, the lyric main idea undergoes a process of continuous evolution, sometimes with the most delicate shading, before Mozart brings back a reprise of the opening and rounds things off with a quiet coda. By sharp contrast, the *Menuetto* is fierce, almost clenched in its chromatic intensity. And then Mozart springs one of his most effective surprises: the trio eases into D major, and—over pizzicato accompaniment—the first violin sings an elegant, soaring melody built on Lombard rhythms (dotted rhythms with the short note coming first). The viola joins the second statement before the return to the driven minuet.

The finale is a theme-and-variation movement. Mozart’s dancing main theme bears more than a passing resemblance to the main theme of the finale of Haydn’s *Quartet in G Major*, Opus 33, No. 5. Perhaps this was intended as an act of homage, but Mozart’s version of this theme is quite subtle: it tints the home key of D minor with hints of D major, and the harmonic tension of this beginning will energize the entire movement.

Four variations follow: the second brings a famous syncopated accompaniment from the second violin, the third features the tawny sound of the viola, the fourth moves into D major. At the very end, Mozart brings back his original theme but now marks it *Più Allegro*, and the music rushes ahead on tense chromatic lines to the sudden end, where the first violin's falling octave D rounds off this glorious quartet with the same gesture that began it.

String Quartet in E Minor, Opus 59, No. 2

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

When Count Andreas Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna and chamber music enthusiast, commissioned a set of three string quartets from Beethoven in 1805, he could not possibly have known what he would receive in return. Beethoven had at that time written one set of six quartets (published in 1801), cast very much in the high classical mold as set out by Haydn and Mozart. Doubtless Razumovsky expected something on this order, and he provided Beethoven with some Russian themes and asked that he include one in each of the three quartets.

The three quartets Beethoven wrote in 1806, however, were so completely original that in one stroke they redefined the whole conception of the string quartet. These are massive quartets, both in duration and dramatic scope, and it is no surprise that they alienated virtually everyone who heard them. Only with time did Beethoven's achievement in this music become clear. Trying to take the measure of this new mu-

sic, some early critics referred to the Razumovsky quartets as “symphony quartets,” but this is misleading, for the quartets are true chamber music. But it is true that what the *Eroica* did for the symphony, these quartets did for the string quartet: they opened new vistas, entirely new conceptions of what the string quartet might be and of the power it might unleash.

The first Razumovsky quartet is broad and heroic and the third extroverted and virtuosic, but the second has defied easy characterization. Part of the problem is that in this quartet Beethoven seems to be experimenting with new ideas about themes and harmony. The thematic material of the first movement in particular has baffled many, for it seems almost consciously non-thematic, while harmonically this quartet can be just as elusive. All four movements are in some form of E, but Beethoven refuses to settle into any key for very long, and one key will melt into another (often unexpected) key in just a matter of measures.

Such a description would seem to make the *Quartet in E Minor* a nervous work, unsettled in its procedures and unsettling to audiences. But the wonder is that—despite these many original strokes—this music is so unified, so convincing, and at times so achingly beautiful. Simple verbal description cannot begin to provide a measure of this music, but a general description can at least aid listeners along the way to discovering this music for themselves. The two chords that open the *Allegro* will recur throughout, at quite different dynamic levels and used in quite different ways. The “theme” that follows seems almost a fragment, and Beethoven reduces it even further, isolating rhythmic motifs and developing intervals from this opening statement. This is a big movement,

and Beethoven asks for repeats of both the exposition and development (not always observed in performance) before the movement closes on a massive restatement of the opening theme, which suddenly fades into silence.

Beethoven's friend Carl Czerny said that the composer had been inspired to write the *Molto Adagio* “when contemplating the starry sky and thinking of the music of the spheres.” Beethoven specifies in the score that “This piece must be played with great feeling,” and after the somewhat nervous first movement the *Adagio* brings a world of expressive intensity. This massive movement, in sonata form, opens with a prayer-like main theme, but all is not peace—along the way Beethoven punctuates the generally hushed mood with powerful massed chords.

The *Allegretto*, with its skittering main theme (the pulses are off the beat), feels somewhat playful. In its trio section, Beethoven introduces Razumovsky's “Russian theme” and then proceeds to subject it to such strait-jacketed contrapuntal treatment that some critics have felt that Beethoven is trying to annihilate the theme; Joseph Kerman speaks of the trio as Beethoven's “revenge” on Razumovsky. The finale begins in the wrong key (C major) and then wobbles uncertainly between C major and E minor throughout. Despite the air of high-spirited dancing in the main theme, this movement too brings stuttering phrases and the treatment of bits of theme, which are sometimes tossed rapidly between the four voices. A *Più Presto* coda brings this most original quartet to a sudden close.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger