



SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

MODIGLIANI QUARTET

Amaury Coeytaux | Violin
Loïc Rio | Violin

Laurent Marfaing | Viola
François Kieffer | Cello

Wednesday, April 5, 2023 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

PUCCINI

I Crisantemi, for string quartet

BEETHOVEN

String Quartet in D Major, Opus 18, No. 3

Allegro
Andante con moto
Allegro
Presto

INTERMISSION

SCHUBERT

String Quartet in D Minor, D.810 "Death and the Maiden"

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Presto

This concert is dedicated to the memory of Paul A. Bissinger, Jr.

Modigliani Quartet is represented by Arts Management Group
130 West 57th Street, Suite 6A, New York, NY 10019 artsmg.com

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ENSEMBLE PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents the San Francisco debut of Modigliani Quartet.

The Paris based **Quatuor Modigliani**, founded in 2003, is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2023. It is a regular guest at the world's top venues and finest String Quartet and Chamber Music series. In 2017 it was a special honor for the quartet to be the first string quartet ever performing in the big hall of the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. In 2020, the quartet became artistic director of the string quartet festival "Quatuors à Bordeaux" as well as the renowned "The Bordeaux International String Quartet Competition".

For the Quatuor Modigliani's anniversary celebration, Jean Frédéric Neuburger composed a new string quartet that will be performed throughout Europe in the upcoming anniversary season 2022-23, including concerts in Madrid, Warsaw, Paris, and London. Since the past season, the quartet has been focusing on the composer Franz Schubert's 225th anniversary in 2022 and will maintain this focus also in the new season with, e.g., a three-part Schubert-cycle at the Musikfest Hamburg in May 2023. Other highlights include an extensive US Tour in April 2023 and performances at the Philharmonic Halls in Luxembourg, Köln, and Oslo.

In December 2020 the Quatuor Modigliani celebrated the world premiere of the String Quartet *Split Apart*, which was composed specifically for them by the British composer Mark Anthony Turnage. The piece has its origins in the UK's referendum to leave or remain in the European Union: the compos-

er's despair and anger at the Brexit vote are channeled into the work. The string quartet was already presented at Musikverein Wien, at Flagey in Brussels and at Concertgebouw Amsterdam; the upcoming season 2022-23 will include performances at Bergen and Oslo as well as in the USA.

Since its formation, the Quatuor Modigliani has enjoyed performing bigger chamber music works, which is how the quartet has built true artistic friendships with other musicians such as Jean-Frédéric Neuburger, Tanja Tetzlaff, and Beatrice Rana. In 2022-23, such concert highlights will be performances with Jean-Guihen Queyras, Yeol Eum Son, and a sextet program with Nathalia Milstein and Amihei Grosz.

The quartet has been recording for the Mirare label since 2008 and has released 12 award winning CDs since. Their 9th album, *Portraits* was featured in the bestseller list 2-2019 (category chamber music) at the "Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik." Their album *Schubert Octet*, which was recorded together with Sabine Meyer, Bruno Schneider, Dag Jensen, and Knut Erik Sundquist and published in April 2020, received international critical acclaim. In January 2022, the Quatuor Modigliani released its newest album: a recording of all 15 string quartets by Franz Schubert, which was received enthusiastically by the international press. In April 2022, *FonoForum* wrote: "In the steep crescendos, in the jagged major-minor conflicts or the wildly driving-out gestures glows an extraordinary intensity, the music sometimes reaches a point where something seems to tear apart."

Thanks to the generosity and support of pri-

vate sponsors, the Quatuor Modigliani plays on four outstanding Italian instruments:

- Amaury Coeytaux plays a 1773 violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini.
- Loïc Rio plays a 1780 violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini.
- Laurent Marfaing plays a 1660 viola by Luigi Mariani.
- François Kieffer plays a 1706 cello by Matteo Goffriller.

The Quatuor Modigliani also thanks SPEDIDAM for its help.

PROGRAM NOTES

I Crisantemi, for string quartet

GIACOMO PUCCINI
(1858-1924)

Prince Amadeo of Savoy, the second son of King Victor Emanuel II, died on January 18, 1890, and in his memory Puccini wrote—"in a night"—a brief piece for string quartet, which he called *I Crisantemi* ("Chrysanthemums"). Puccini was at this time almost unknown. At age 31, he had composed only two operas, and neither of these—*Le Villi* and *Edgar*—had achieved much success. Real fame would not come to the young composer for another three years, when *Manon Lescaut* was produced in February 1893.

Puccini wrote very little purely instrumental music, and *I Crisantemi* has become the best-known of this handful of works. The editor of the modern edition of the score notes that in Italy chrysanthemums are invariably associated with funerals, so the title may have seemed a natural one to the composer. He marks this grieving and melodic piece *Andante mesto* ("sad"), and the music retains a somber hue throughout its brief span. Opera lovers may find that *I Crisantemi* sounds familiar. Liking this music, Puccini borrowed two of its themes for use in the final act of *Manon Lescaut*, where they accompany Manon's death. *I Crisantemi* has been arranged for string orchestra and has become familiar in that version. It is heard at this concert in Puccini's original version for string quartet.

String Quartet in D Major, Opus 18, No. 3

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)

The young Beethoven spent his first decade in Vienna mastering the forms Haydn

and Mozart had used before him, and the string quartet in particular gave Beethoven cause for anxiety. Haydn and Mozart had done some of their finest work in this most demanding of musical forms (Haydn himself was still writing quartets in Vienna at this time), and the young composer took his time before rushing onto a field where the competition was so formidable. He worked on the six quartets of his Opus 18 for two years before completing them in 1800, but the order of publication does not reflect the order of their creation: though published third, the *Quartet in D Major* was actually the first to be written.

It is Beethoven's only string quartet in D major, a key he rarely used in his mature works. That key seems to have evoked from Beethoven a particularly unclouded music (the *Second Symphony*, *Violin Concerto*, and the outer movements of the "Ghost" Trio), and the *Quartet in D Major* is unremittingly sunny; even the *Andante*, the one movement not in the home key, shares this mood. In his first quartet, Beethoven settles for a normal structure (sonata-form first movement, a lyric second, a minuet, and a brilliant finale) and writes straightforward music.

The *Allegro* takes its mood from the opening theme, with its graceful upward leap of a seventh and its flowing lines. The young composer offers some rhythmic surprises along the way: the second theme is built on off-the-beat accents, and Beethoven at points uses triplets to break the steady flow and thrust the rhythmic pulse forward. The long development edges toward unexpected keys but returns to the genial mood of the opening to bring the movement to its close.

The *Andante con moto* is based on the lyric idea introduced immediately by the second violin, but the development of this theme is so elegant and poised that the entire movement has an almost rococo feel; the very ending—where the theme breaks down into fragments—is particularly effective. The brief third movement is marked simply *Allegro*; it is in minuet form, though this is a minuet that sometimes places the stress on the final beat of the measure rather than on the first. The trio section makes a quick excursion into D minor before the home key returns in a repeat that Beethoven wrote out (it offers minor variations on the first statement). In its brilliance, the concluding *Presto* has been compared to the dazzling finales of some of Haydn's quartets. The galloping 6/8 main theme permeates the movement—it is treated contrapuntally at times, played in thirds by the two violins at others. After all the excitement, Beethoven brings the

quartet to a surprisingly understated close: two brief pulses from the main theme serve as the cadence. It is an effect he may have learned from Mozart (K.464), and it reminds us that—in his first quartet—Beethoven was very aware of the footsteps behind him.

String Quartet in D Minor, D.810 "Death and the Maiden"

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797–1828)

In the fall of 1822 Schubert became extremely ill, and every indication is that he had contracted syphilis. The effect on him—physically and emotionally—was devastating. He was quite ill throughout 1823, so seriously in May that he had to be hospitalized. His health had in fact been shattered permanently, and he would never be fully well again. The cause of his death five years later at 31, officially listed as typhoid, was probably at least partially a result of syphilis. Emotionally, the illness was so destructive that he never went back to complete the symphony he had been working on when he contracted the disease—it would come to be known as the "Unfinished."

By early 1824 Schubert had regained some measure of health and strength, and he turned to chamber music, composing two string quartets, the second of them in D minor. The nickname *Der Tod und Das Mädchen* ("Death and the Maiden") comes from Schubert's use of a theme from his 1817 song by that name as the basis for a set of variations in the quartet's second movement. In the song, which sets a poem of Matthias Claudius, death beckons a young girl; she begs him to pass her over, but he insists, saying that his embrace is soothing, like sleep. It is easy to believe that, under the circumstances, the thought of soothing death may have held some attraction for the composer.

The quartet itself is extremely dramatic. The *Allegro* rips to life with a five-note figure spit out by all four instruments. This hardly feels like chamber music. One can easily imagine this figure stamped out furiously by a huge orchestra, and the dramatic nature of this movement marks it as nearly symphonic (in fact, Gustav Mahler arranged this quartet for string orchestra in 1894, and that version is performed and recorded today). A gentle second subject brings a measure of relief, but the hammering triplet of the opening figure is never far away—it can be heard quietly in the accompaniment, as

part of the main theme, and as part of the development. The *Allegro*, which lasts a full quarter of an hour, comes to a quiet close with the triplet rhythm sounding faintly in the distance.

The *Andante con moto* is deceptively simple. From the song *Der Tod und Das Mädchen*, Schubert uses only death's music, which is an almost static progression of chords; the melody moves quietly within the chords. But from that simple progression Schubert writes five variations that are themselves quite varied—by turns soaring, achingly lyric, fierce, calm—and the wonder is that so simple a chordal progression can yield music of such expressiveness and variety.

After two overpowering movements, the *Scherzo: Allegro molto* might seem almost lightweight, for it is extremely short. But it returns to the slashing mood of the opening movement and takes up that same strength. The trio sings easily in the lower voices as the first violin flutters and decorates their melodic line. An unusual feature of the trio is that it has no repeat—Schubert instead writes an extension of the trio, almost a form of variation itself.

The final movement, appropriately marked *Presto*, races ahead on its 6/8 rhythm. Some listeners have felt that this movement is death-haunted, and they point out that its main theme is a tarantella, the old dance of death, and that Schubert also quotes quietly from his own song *Erkönig*. Significantly, the phrase he quotes in that song sets death's words "Mein liebes Kind, komm geh mit mir" (My dear child, come go with me), which is precisely the message of the song *Der Tod und das Mädchen*. What this movement is "about" must be left to each listener to decide, but it is hard to believe this music death-haunted. The principal impression it makes is of overwhelming power—propulsive rhythms, huge blocks of sound, sharp dynamic contrasts—and the very ending, a dazzling rush marked *Prestissimo* that suddenly leaps into D major, blazes with life.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger