



Danish String Quartet

Frederik Øland / *Violin*

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen / *Violin*

Asbjørn Nørgaard / *Viola*

Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin / *Cello*

Thursday Evening, November 15, 2018 at 7:30

Rackham Auditorium

Ann Arbor

This evening's performance is supported by Emily Bandera and by Joel Howell and Linda Samuelson.

Media partnership provided by WGTE 91.3 FM and WRCJ 90.9 FM.

The Danish String Quartet appears by arrangement with Kirshbaum Associates.

The Danish String Quartet records exclusively for ECM Records and has previously recorded for Dacapo and CAvi-music/BR-Klassik.

In consideration for the artists and the audience, please refrain from the use of electronic devices during the performance.

The photography, sound recording, or videotaping of this performance is prohibited.

PROGRAM

Franz Josef Haydn

String Quartet No. 25 in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2

Moderato

Capriccio: Adagio — Cantabile

Menuet: Allegretto

Fuga a 4 soggetti: Allegro

Hans Abrahamsen

String Quartet No. 1, “Ten Preludes”

Intermission

Ludwig van Beethoven

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135

Allegretto

Vivace

Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Grave — Allegro — Grave, ma non troppo tratto — Allegro

STRING QUARTET NO. 25 IN C MAJOR, OP. 20, NO. 2 (1772)

Franz Josef Haydn

Born March 31, 1732 in Rohrau, Lower Austria

Died May 31, 1809 in Vienna

UMS premiere: Belcea Quartet; October 2009 in Rackham Auditorium.

Snapshot of History...In 1772:

- The British schooner *Gaspee* is burned by American patriots off the coast of Rhode Island in an event that prepared the way for the Revolution
- Scottish chemist Daniel Rutherford isolates nitrogen
- Johann Gottfried von Herder publishes his influential *Treatise on the Origin of Language*

Haydn is often called the “father” of the string quartet. While this is not entirely true (there were others, most notably Luigi Boccherini, who made significant early contributions to the genre), Haydn certainly opened a major new chapter in quartet history with his Op. 20 quartets. It would be no exaggeration to say that Viennese classical style as we know it was born in 1772, with Haydn’s fourth published set of six quartets. Individualization of the four instrumental parts, a sophisticated way of thematic development, and a prodigious diversity of musical characters are only a few features that distinguish these path-breaking masterworks — features that were further developed in the later works of Haydn, as well as those of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert.

Within the standard framework of opening sonata form — slow movement–minuet–finale, each movement of the C-Major Quartet is unmistakably unique. The first, proceeding in an unhurried “Moderato” instead of the usual “Allegro,”

surprises at every turn with its irregular and quite unpredictable phrases, the simultaneous development of three distinct thematic materials, and many daring key changes. The slow movement is even more extraordinary: it opens with a dark, recitative-like theme played by all four instruments in unison and wends its way through many dramatic interruptions until the recitative receives its “aria” — a soaring, song-like melody played by the first violin which itself breaks down in the middle. The movement’s inscription, “Capriccio,” refers to its highly unusual musical form. In a further surprising move, Haydn doesn’t bring this “Adagio” to a full close; instead, he leaves it open with a half-cadence and segues directly into the third-movement “Minuet.” Whatever expectations we might have about a minuet, Haydn confounds them here: by the numerous slurs across the bar lines, he completely obscures our perception of the three-quarter time, only to suddenly burst into dance a moment later. A brief, enigmatic, and —

once again — open-ended trio section does little to help us get our bearings.

This Quartet is one of three in Op. 20 to end with a fugue. Haydn marked the C-Major fugue as *a 4 soggetti*, or four subjects. What this means is that, at various points, the main theme is joined by three different countersubjects. Haydn uses several learned devices from the Baroque era such as thematic inversion and overlapping thematic statements (*stretto*). At the end, however, counterpoint is replaced by a powerful dramatic unison, similar to what we heard in the second movement. Haydn wrote a Latin phrase into the score: "*Sic fugit amicus amicum*" (thus friend flies from friend), playing on the word *fugue* and affording a glimpse into the thought associations evoked in him by his own music.

QUARTET LIFE: AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY

by Doyle Armbrust

Playing in a string quartet is both exhilarating and infuriating.

Often simultaneously.

Those of us who have chosen this path spend more time with our quartet-mates than our families (seriously, ask the guys after the show, or any professional) on a quixotic mission to sculpt the perfect phrase, unified bow stroke, and group intonation. Yes, every musician in classical music is chasing down these goals to some extent, but there is something unique about the string quartet: an ensemble that won't bat an eye at spending two hours in a rehearsal tuning eight seconds of music, to use a very real-world example.

The string quartet player sits on a fence for their entire career. This fence divides the Grove of Cooperation from the Forest of Virtuosity, to run with this metaphor for a moment. Unlike the admirable position of sitting in the string section of an orchestra, the responsibility of a full 25% of the music lies with a single person. There is no such thing as riding out a bout of illness, tough mental health day, or recent argument with a spouse by leaning on one's section on a given night. It's all up to you. Not only that, but you must shine as a brilliant soloist in one moment and then instantly pivot to a supporting and ego-less role in the next.

And this is just one element of many in this absurd career. You must also be willing to enter any airport jetway or restaurant around the world and be willing to smile when the flight attendant or host asks the inevitable, "So, are you going to play something

for us?" This happens no less than 100% of the time.

"So, what's your day job?" and "How much did your instrument cost?" are other omnipresent strangers-on-a-plane nuggets, but this is getting a little "inside baseball."

Aside from Arnold Steinhardt's exceptional writing about his years as first violinist of the Guarneri Quartet (go ahead and add *Indivisible By Four* to your Kindle wish list) and the occasional documentary or cringe-worthy Hollywood drama (looking at you, *A Late Quartet*), this particular slice of life is not particularly well-documented.

I do not know the members of the Danish Quartet personally, though I have always admired their stellar playing, but there are certain components of string quartet life that appear to be universal, and I thought I'd take this opportunity to let you in on some of them.

The first is that, even today, many composers consider writing a string quartet as a fraught and daunting task, given the fact that once grandpappy Haydn got this genre of classical music hopping back in the mid-18th century, it quickly gained popularity and composers like Beethoven, Bartók, and Carter saved some of their most exalted creativity for this forum.

Why? One likely reason is the transparency of the sound of four voices sharing a complementary timbre, or flavor of sound. This is also one very specific — and often hair-pulling-ly frustrating — reason why the work is never done for a

performing string quartet. There is no reaching the summit...there is only the next peak to climb.

Listen to the opening phrase of the Haydn Op. 20, No. 2 tonight — a bit of music I love in part because it feels not so distant from the music of the Baroque period. The cello lofts into a simple, delightful melody as the viola outlines the harmony with short strokes beneath. This is all taken place in C Major, a key with which any (even occasional) listener to classical music is intimately familiar. Digging a bit deeper than the charm of this lovely melody for a moment, both instruments are bending their E-naturals (the third note in the C Major scale) downward to find that sweet spot where all the wavelengths are vibrating in perfect rapport. But the open 'E' string on the violin sits higher than this adjusted 'E' in the low strings, and there are plenty of open 'E'-string notes in the violins to come.

You can start to see why most quartet players are on an anxiety spectrum... and are never not rehearsing.

Haydn is revered in part because he creates such beauty with such a concise musical palette, and because his rhythms and harmonies take unexpected and often puckish left turns. Keep an ear out for these moments (pro-tip: there's a particularly good one about a minute into the fourth-movement fugue). Also, because you have the great good fortune of listening to one of the finest quartets around, notice when the group sounds big — not loud, but immense — as this is only

possible through the expert tuning of the players, when all those sound waves are spinning around the room, uninhibited by even the slightest misalignment.

Another...*ahem*...thrilling aspect of quartet life comes with persuading traditional presenters to program anything other than Haydn/Mozart/Beethoven/etc. "We don't program new music," I was reprimanded by a presenter just last month when I pitched a program including Schoenberg's *String Quartet No. 3* and Ruth Crawford Seeger's *String Quartet*, both of which are...wait for it...OVER 80 YEARS OLD.

Thankfully you are in the good (and creatively minded) hands of UMS, though, and I'm so envious that you get to experience Hans Abrahamsen's *String Quartet No. 1, "Ten Preludes."*

These "short stories" for string quartet have more in common with Haydn than it may appear at first listen. Consider how transparent the writing is here, between the moments of fantastic dramatic chaos. I'm particularly fond of the Danish Quartet's interpretation of these pithy little movements. There is a lustiness to their playing that, just like one of George Saunders's mind-bending short stories, actualizes a fully formed and multi-hued world in a just a few brief minutes.

Now, on to Beethoven. I have yet to interview a quartet member that doesn't all but genuflect when the quartets of Ludwig van are mentioned. But why? It may be generally agreed upon that he was a genius, but

again, why? In the case of his string quartets, I believe it comes down to the way Beethoven merges the transparency (there's that word again) of Haydn with an altogether cutting-edge approach to string writing. Haydn and Mozart considered the ease of playability in their music, but Beethoven wasn't about to be boxed in by such silly constraints. "Beethoven doesn't give a ..." is a common refrain in my quartet when we encounter a particularly gnarly passage that has the fingers in knots, or asks for total seamlessness while treacherously skipping between strings in a lyrical moment.

This brings us to our final bit of insider knowledge about string quartet life: The Specter of History. In our field, *thar be giants*: Amadeus Quartet, Guarneri Quartet, Cleveland Quartet, and Alban Berg Quartet, just to name a few. And they've all performed or recorded a piece like Op. 135 hundreds of times between them. So why does the world need to hear yet another quartet interpret these mystical pieces? This is a complicated question, but the simple answer is that each ensemble can't help but insert themselves into a historic work. My favorite recording of this piece features the Alban Berg Quartet, but even if the Danish gents were to copy the German quartet's every musical choice, it would still sound like the Danish Quartet.

This is a profoundly good argument for why we pay a babysitter, or cough up the cash for a season subscription, to hear music that's been around for decades — or even centuries. In this Beethoven, pay close attention to the third-movement "Lento assai, cantate

e tranquillo." This is the movement that, for me, offers a quartet the most room to put their stamp on the piece, with its hymn-like, heart-tugging harmonies that seem to change shape right before our ears. The version you hear today is the only one of its kind. The same Danish Quartet will sound distinctly different when they play Kaufmann Hall in New York two days from now.

Let me leave you with a friendly suggestion. If you queue up for an autograph or selfie with the Quartet after the show, bypass the questions they will have fielded at every stop on this tour: "Where are you going next?" or "What violin do you play on?" Instead, blow their collective minds with something like, "What was your takeaway moment from tonight's concert?" or "What do you love about playing the Abrahamsen?" Then, look for that twinkle of gratitude in their eyes.

Doyle Armbrust is a Chicago-based violist and member of the Spektral Quartet. He is a contributing writer for WQXR's Q2 Music, Crain's Chicago Business, Chicago Magazine, Chicago Tribune, and formerly, Time Out Chicago.

STRING QUARTET NO. 1, “TEN PRELUDES” (1973)

Hans Abrahamsen

Born December 23, 1952 in Copenhagen, Denmark

UMS premiere: This work has never been performed on a UMS concert.

Snapshot of History...In 1973:

- The Communist League (Kommunistisk Forbund) is founded in Denmark
- US involvement in the Vietnam War ends
- The World Trade Center complex is officially dedicated in New York

Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen was the recipient of the Grawemeyer Award, informally known as the “Nobel Prize of Music,” in 2016. Universally recognized as one of the most original voices on today’s new-music scene, Abrahamsen is credited with writing the first “true classic” of the 21st century: *Schnee* (Snow), a series of 10 canons for instrumental ensemble in which the composer fundamentally rethought the concept of canon and its uses.

He did something similar for the concept of the “prelude,” of which he likewise offered 10, in his *String Quartet No. 1*, written at the age of 21. In the words of British musicologist Paul Griffiths (also the librettist of Abrahamsen’s award-winning orchestral song cycle *Let Me Tell You*), in this early work, Abrahamsen gave:

...the rotations and simple modalities of recent Steve Reich and Terry Riley a European tilt, the modal color deriving not from current popular music but from an older vein of folk song, and the energies, both harmonic and rhythmic, compacted by contrast into brief forms: “short stories,” as the composer has called them.

Abrahamsen evidently recognized that (European) serialism and (US) minimalism, though one was brought in to deal with all 12 notes and the other tended to choose rather few, were both basically algorithmic, and his preludes delight in simple mechanisms that often have far from simple results. A striking example is No. 5, where the instruments start on chromatic neighbors, the first violin on ‘A,’ the viola and cello on the next note down, and the second violin in the lower octave on ‘G,’ the instrument’s bottom note in normal tuning. The cello stays on its note in fast staccato repetitions, played at the tip of the bow; meanwhile, the others follow an elementary scheme — the viola moves up in semitones, the first violin in whole tones, the second violin in minor thirds — to create a succession of wonderful and unpredictable harmonies. In No. 3 these same intervals, of one, two, and three semitones, become a motif. Curtailed — to one semitone followed by two — this motif occurs all over the place. In the first prelude, for instance, it comes whirling in, as if from across the Atlantic to rescue a distinctly European stretch of

chromatic counterpoint — except that its whirling is not in detail repetitive, but only seems so from the restriction to three notes: B-C-D-B-C-B-D-C-B... Filling this motif to make a four-note chromatic sequence produces the seed of No. 6. And so on.

Often, then, the stories work with the same or similar figures, and each of them has an individual character. Busy with incident as the first is, No. 4 is all white-note music, its central section an extraordinarily daring invention for a young composer at the time: the four instruments move in unison, in regular rhythm, and almost entirely scalewise, with hymn-like certainty. The movement then ends with a wheel through triad steps that stops after a single turn. No. 8, most minimalist of the preludes, is more continuously cyclical, moving away from and several times back through pure 'G' in octaves, this being another of the movements in which the violin's bottom note is an anchor (No. 2 is also firmly in this group). Beyond these correspondences between distant installments, Abrahamsen has suggested that each prelude remembers its predecessor and looks forward to the next. An obvious example of such a linkage is the pulsing low 'G' at the start of No. 2, which picks up from the 'C'-'E' oscillation at the end of No. 1 and does so not only rhythmically but also by completing a major chord. Perhaps it is partly through these liaisons that the 10 movements cohere into what is indeed a string quartet, having an overall tendency towards traditional

harmony, through the folk dance incursions, veiled and overt, of No. 7, and the strong modal song of No. 9 to the surprising but also surprisingly right finale, a Renaissance-style dance in C Major.

Program note excerpt used with permission by Paul Griffiths and ECM Records.

STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR, OP. 135 (1826)

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

UMS premiere: Roth String Quartet; March 1939 in Hill Auditorium.

Snapshots of History...In 1826:

- The first train operates over the Granite Railway in Massachusetts
- Former US Presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both die on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the United States Declaration of Independence
- The French newspaper *Le Figaro* begins publication in Paris, initially as a weekly

Beethoven had much on his mind during the summer and fall of 1826 at the time he wrote what was to remain his final string quartet. Already plagued by severe illness, the 55-year-old master suffered the heaviest blow of his life when his nephew Karl attempted suicide and was subsequently hospitalized for two months. For years, Beethoven had fought his sister-in-law in court for custody of the boy, who was at this time the only human being he really cared about; but he exerted a tyrannical control over Karl that drove the young man to utter despair. It was during this traumatic period that Beethoven began work on the F-Major Quartet. The work was completed after the boy, just released from the hospital, accompanied his uncle to Gneixendorf, a two-day trip from Vienna up the Danube, where his other uncle, Johann van Beethoven, owned an estate.

The last movement of Op. 135 is preceded by an enigmatic line of musical notation by Beethoven,

containing the themes of the “Grave” introduction and the “Allegro” section, with the question and answer “*Muss es sein? — Es muss sein!*” (Must it be? — It must be!) underlaid. Above the line appear the words “*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*” (The Difficult Decision). There have been numerous attempts to explain what Beethoven was referring to. There is a humorous canon Beethoven wrote in the spring of 1826 using the words “*Es muss sein*” with almost the same music as in the quartet; the occasion for the canon was that a certain Ignaz Dembscher had failed to pay for the parts of Beethoven’s Op. 130 Quartet that he had ordered. In a letter to the publisher Moritz Schlesinger, Beethoven wrote:

Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto...

Surely, however, there is more to this “decision” than these two rather mundane stories suggest. We can tell from the complex ways the characteristic descending fourth of the “*Es muss sein*” motif is woven into the fabric of the whole piece, starting from the very opening of the first movement. This innocent-looking “Allegretto” has often, but somewhat misleadingly, been described as a nostalgic look back on the bygone days of Mozart and Haydn. The simple harmonies that evoke the memory of the older Viennese classics are combined with some extremely intricate textures. The melodic material is passed back and forth among the four instruments with great sophistication, and the sudden changes between motion in quarter notes and 16th triplets (the latter going six times as fast as the former) are extremely striking. There is a hidden, mysterious tension behind the Haydnian façade, waiting to explode.

The explosion comes in the second-movement scherzo, whose rough humor, once again, derives its power from the simplicity of the means employed. The first violin’s theme goes down and up, outlining a three-note scale fragment, somewhat like “Three Blind Mice.” The second violin plays a drone, the viola alternates between only two notes, and the cello intones a motif that, like that of the first violin, outlines a circular (rising and falling) motion. Then the note ‘E-flat,’ foreign to the key of F Major, appears seemingly out of nowhere, and is repeated several times as the whole harmonic direction of the movement becomes uncertain before the previous motivic

material re-establishes itself and, slightly developed, completes the scherzo proper. The middle section is a wild romp where the first violin’s ascending scales and wide leaps are offset by a pulsating quarter-note accompaniment in the other instruments. The ascent in keys (from ‘F’ to ‘G’ to ‘A’) is highly unusual and adds considerably to the excitement. The scherzo proper then returns after a re-transition section in which the first violin’s “Blind Mice” motif is mysteriously repeated by the four instruments in unison.

The sublime third movement brings us one of Beethoven’s most heartfelt, hymn-like melodies. On closer look, however, it turns out that its descending and ascending scale figures are almost identical to those in the scherzo, only in slow motion! Its middle section is even slower; the melody of the violin, accompanied by the other instruments in identical rhythm, seems to be choking back tears. Afterwards, the hymn-like melody returns, embellished by ornamental figures that, although marked *semplice*, actually verge on the ecstatic.

It is after three movements of such contrasting characters (that nevertheless share a great deal of motivic material) that we arrive at the “Difficult Decision.” The brief “Grave” introduction, which asks the question “*Muss es sein?*” functions as a recitative to the “Allegro” section’s aria, in which the affirmation of “*Es muss sein*” is followed by a positively playful and humorous second theme, as if all doubts had been laid to rest once and for all. Yet that is not quite the case just yet:

the question, in the minor mode, is restated as the “Grave” tempo returns. The repeat of the positive answer is interrupted before the end when the “*Es muss sein*” motif itself is turned into a question. Played at a slower tempo and its straightforward perfect fourth distorted into an anguished diminished interval, this momentary *poco adagio* provides a last-minute suspense. The dilemma is definitively resolved when the second theme appears *pizzicato* (with plucked strings), leading into a final confirmation on all four instruments: “*Es muss sein, es muss sein!*” Thus, Beethoven’s last quartet ends on a positive and highly confident note. (It was almost his last completed composition, as it was followed only by the new and even more exuberant “Allegro” for the *String Quartet in B-flat Major* that replaced the *Grosse Fuge* when that quartet was published as Op. 130.)

Program notes by Peter Laki.

UMS ARCHIVES

Tonight's performance marks the **Danish String Quartet's** second appearance under UMS auspices following the Quartet's UMS debut in November 2015 in Rackham Auditorium.

ARTISTS

Among today's many exceptional chamber music groups, the **Danish String Quartet** 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, from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. Their performances bring a rare musical spontaneity, giving audiences the sense of hearing even treasured canon repertoire as if for the first time, and exuding a palpable joy in music-making that have made them enormously in-demand on concert stages throughout the world.

Since its debut in 2002, the Danish String Quartet has demonstrated a special affinity for Scandinavian composers, from Nielsen to Hans Abrahamsen, alongside music of Mozart and Beethoven. The Quartet's musical interests also encompass Nordic folk music, the focus of its newest recording, *Last Leaf*, on the ECM label. The recipient of many awards and prestigious appointments, including the Borletti Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's CMS Two Program.

The group takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007, they established the DSQ Festival, now in its 11th year, which takes place in an intimate and informal setting in Copenhagen. This October, the Danish String Quartet performs, over the course of six concerts, the complete Beethoven cycle of 16 string quartets. In 2016, they inaugurated a new music festival, Series of Four, which they both perform and invite colleagues — the Ebène Quartet,

mandolin player Chris Thile, among others — to appear at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall. Concerts this season range from a chamber version of the Fauré *Requiem*, a recital with violinist Augustin Hadelich, and the Scandinavian debut of the Vision String Quartet.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjorn Norgaard 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.

TONIGHT'S VICTORS FOR UMS:



Emily Bandera

—

Joel Howell and
Linda Samuelson

Supporters of this evening's performance by the Danish String Quartet.

MAY WE ALSO RECOMMEND...

- 2/21 International Contemporary Ensemble: *In Plain Air*
3/12–13 Philharmonia Orchestra
4/7 Takács Quartet with Anthony McGill

Tickets available at www.ums.org.

ON THE EDUCATION HORIZON...

- 12/1 *Messiah* Pre-Performance Talk: Meet the Conductor
(Hill Auditorium Mezzanine Lobby, 6:00 pm)
Must have a ticket to that evening's performance of Handel's Messiah to attend.
- 12/16 Pre-Performance Talk: How Singers and Pianists Collaborate
(Hill Auditorium Mezzanine Lobby, 3:00 pm)
Must have a ticket to that afternoon's performance by Joyce DiDonato and Yannick Nézet-Séguin to attend.

Educational events are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.