

presents...

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET | Ensemble-in-Residence

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Frederick Lifszitz | Violin

David Samuel | Viola
Sandy Wilson | Cello

ROBERT GREENBERG | Music Historian-in-Residence

Saturday, October 8, 2022 | 10am

Saturday, October 22, 2022 | 10am

Herbst Theatre

Music as a Mirror of Our World: Chamber Music at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

OCTOBER 8: *France*

DEBUSSY

String Quartet in G Minor, Opus 10

Animé et très décidé

Scherzo: Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino doucement expressif

Très modéré; Très mouvementé; Très animé

INTERMISSION

RAVEL

String Quartet in F Major

Allegro moderato. Très doux

Assez vif. Très rythmé

Très lent

Vif et agité



OCTOBER 22: *Scandinavia*

NIELSEN

String Quartet No. 1 in G Minor, Opus 13 FS4

Allegro energico

Andante amoroso

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Finale: Allegro (inquieto)

INTERMISSION

SIBELIUS

String Quartet in D Minor, Opus 56 "Voces intimae"

Andante: Allegro molto moderato

Vivace

Adagio di molto

Allegretto (ma pesante)

Allegro

**The Saturday Morning Series is sponsored in part by the
Mark D. Kaplanoff Lecture Fund of San Francisco Performances' Endowment.**

The **Alexander String Quartet** is Ensemble-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances in association with San Francisco State University and the May T. Morrison Chamber Music Center.

The **Alexander String Quartet** is represented by Besen Arts
7 Delaney Place, Tenafly, NJ 07670-1607 besenarts.com

The Quartet frequently performs and records on a matched set of instruments by the San Francisco-based maker Francis Kuttner, circa 1987.



ARTIST PROFILES

The Alexander String Quartet celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2021. The Quartet has been Ensemble-in-Residence since 1989 with San Francisco Performances, the result of a unique partnership between SF Performances and The Morrison Chamber Music Center at San Francisco State University. Starting in 1994, the Quartet joined with SF Performances' Music Historian-in-Residence, Robert Greenberg, to present the Saturday Morning Series exploring string quartet literature.

The Quartet has appeared on SF Performances' mainstage Chamber Series many times, collaborating with such artists as soprano Elly Ameling and mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; clarinetists Richard Stoltzman, Joan Enric Lluna and Eli Eban; pianists James Tocco, Menahem Pressler, Jeremy Menuhin, and Joyce Yang; and composer Jake Heggie.

Robert Greenberg, in addition to his programs with the Alexander String Quartet, lectures frequently for SF Performances.

The **Alexander String Quartet** has performed in the major music capitals of five continents, securing its standing among the world's premier ensembles, and a major artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble-in-Residence of San Francisco Performances and Directors of The Morrison Chamber Music Center Instructional Program at San Francisco State University. Widely ad-

mired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich, the quartet's recordings have won international critical acclaim. They have established themselves as important advocates of new music commissioning dozens of new works from composers including Jake Heggie, Cindy Cox, Augusta Read Thomas, Robert Greenberg, Cesar Cano, Tarik O'Regan, Paul Siskind, and Pulitzer Prize-winner Wayne Peterson. Samuel Carl Adams' *Quintet with Pillars* was premiered in 2018 and has been widely performed across the U.S. by the Alexander with pianist Joyce Yang.

The Alexander String Quartet's annual calendar includes engagements at major halls throughout North America and Europe. They have appeared at Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, the Metropolitan Museum, Jordan Hall, the Library of Congress, and chamber music societies and universities across the North American continent including Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Lewis and Clark, Pomona, UCLA, the Krannert Center, Purdue and many more. Recent overseas tours include the U.K., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, France, Greece, the Republic of Georgia, Argentina, Panamá, and the Philippines. Their visit to Poland's Beethoven Easter Festival is beautifully captured in the 2017 award-winning documentary, *Con Moto: The Alexander String Quartet*.

Distinguished musicians with whom

the Alexander String Quartet has collaborated include pianists Joyce Yang, Roger Woodward, Menachem Pressler, Marc-André Hamelin, and Jeremy Menuhin; clarinetists Joan Enric Lluna, Richard Stoltzman, and Eli Eban; soprano Elly Ameling; mezzo-sopranos Joyce DiDonato and Kindra Scharich; violinist Midori; violist Toby Appel; cellists Lynn Harrell, Sadao Harada, and David Requiro; and jazz greats Branford Marsalis, David Sanchez, and Andrew Speight. The quartet has worked with many composers including Aaron Copland, George Crumb, and Elliott Carter, and enjoys a close relationship with composer-lecturer Robert Greenberg, performing numerous lecture-concerts with him annually.

Recording for the FoghornClassics label, their 2021 recording of the complete string quartet of Brahms has been praised by *MusicWeb International*: "The joy of this quartet's playing is immediately apparent in the ferocious opening movement of the C minor quartet: they play with all the verve, drive and passion you could wish for but never at the expense of homogeneity or intonation—and the sustained warmth and depth of their string tone are a constant delight." *Fanfare* lauded their 2020 release of the Mozart and Brahms clarinet quintets (with Eli Eban) as "clearly one of the Alexander Quartet's finest releases." Their release in 2019 of Dvořák's "American" quartet and piano quintet (with Joyce

Yang) was selected by *MusicWeb International* as a featured recording of the year, praising it for interpretations performed “with the bright-eyed brilliance of first acquaintance.” Also released in 2019 was a recording of the Late Quartets of Mozart, receiving critical acclaim (“Exceptionally beautiful performances of some extraordinarily beautiful music.” –*Fanfare*), as did their 2018 release of Mozart’s Piano Quartets with Joyce Yang. (“These are by far, hands down and feet up, the most amazing performances of Mozart’s two piano quartets that have ever graced these ears” –*Fanfare*.) Other major releases have included the combined string quartet cycles of Bartók and Kodály (“If ever an album had ‘Grammy nominee’ written on its front cover, this is it.” –*Audiophile Audition*); the string quintets and sextets of Brahms with violist Toby Appel and cellist David Requiro (“a uniquely detailed, transparent warmth” –*Strings Magazine*); the Schumann and Brahms piano quintets with Joyce Yang (“passionate, soulful readings of two pinnacles of the chamber repertory” –*The New York Times*); and the Beethoven cycle (“A landmark journey through the greatest of all quartet cycles” –*Strings Magazine*). Their catalog also includes the Shostakovich cycle, Mozart’s Ten Famous Quartets, and the Mahler Song Cycles in new transcriptions by Zakarias Grafilo.

The Alexander String Quartet formed in New York City in 1981, capturing international attention as the first American quartet to win the London (now Wigmore) International String Quartet Competition in 1985. The quartet has received honorary degrees from Allegheny College and Saint Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY). The Alexander plays on a matched set of instruments made in San Francisco by Francis Kuttner, known as the Ellen M. Egger quartet.

Dr. Robert Greenberg was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1954 and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1978. He received a B.A. in Music, magna cum laude, from Princeton University in 1976 and a Ph.D. in music composition, *With Distinction*, from the University of California, Berkeley in 1984.

Greenberg has composed more than 50 works for a variety of instrumental and vocal ensembles. Performances of his works have taken place across the United States and Europe.

Dr. Greenberg has received numerous honors, including commissions from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in the Li-



brary of Congress, the Alexander String Quartet, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, San Francisco Performances, and the XTET ensemble. His music is published by Fallen Leaf Press and CPP/Belwin and is recorded on the Innova label.

Greenberg is a Steinway Artist.

Dr. Greenberg is currently the Music Historian-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances, where he has lectured and performed since 1994. He has served on the faculties of the University of California, Berkeley; California State University, East Bay; the Advanced Management Program at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business; and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he chaired the Department of Music History and Literature from 1989 to 2001.

Dr. Greenberg has lectured for some of the most prestigious musical and arts organizations in the United States, including the San Francisco Symphony (where for 10 years he was host and lecturer for the symphony’s nationally acclaimed Discovery Series), the Chautauqua Institution (where he was the Everett Scholar-in-Residence during the 2006 season), the Ravinia Festival, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Van Cliburn Foundation, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Villa Montalvo, the Phoenix Orchestra, the University of British Columbia (where he was the Dal Grauer Lecturer in September 2006), and Philadelphia’s College of Physicians (where he has been the Behrend Lecturer since 2017).

In addition, Dr. Greenberg is a sought-after lecturer for businesses and business schools and has spoken for such diverse organizations as S. C. Johnson, Deutsche Bank, the University of California/Haas School of

Business Executive Seminar and the Goldman School of Public Policy, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, Harvard Business School Publishing, Kaiser Permanente, the Young Presidents’ Organization, the World Presidents’ Organization, and the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco. Dr. Greenberg has been profiled in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Inc. Magazine*, the *Times of London*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, among other publications.

For 15 years, Dr. Greenberg was the resident composer and music historian for NPR’s *Weekend All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition, Sunday* with Liane Hansen. His show *Scandalous Overtures* can be seen on www.ora.tv/shows.

In May 1993, Greenberg recorded a 48-lecture course entitled “How to Listen to and Understand Great Music” for The Great Courses/The Teaching Company. (This course was named in the January 1996 edition of *Inc. Magazine* as one of “The Nine Leadership Classics You’ve Never Read.”) Dr. Greenberg has since recorded 30 additional courses. The most recent, “The Great Music of the 20th Century,” was released in January 2018.

In February 2003, Maine’s *Bangor Daily News* referred to Dr. Greenberg as the Elvis of music history and appreciation, an appraisal that has given him more pleasure than any other.

Dr. Greenberg is currently “blogging, vlogging, performing, Zooming, reviewing, opining, and bloviating 4-6 times a week” on his subscription site at [Patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic](https://www.patreon.com/RobertGreenbergMusic).

PROGRAM NOTES OCTOBER 8

String Quartet in G Minor, Opus 10

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862–1918)

Early in 1893, Debussy met the famed Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe. Debussy was at this time almost unknown (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was still a year in the future), but he and Ysaÿe instantly became friends—though Ysaÿe was only four years older than Debussy, he treated the diminutive Frenchman like “his little brother.” That summer, Debussy composed a string quartet for Ysaÿe’s quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29,

1893. Debussy was already notorious with his teachers for his refusal to follow musical custom, and so it comes as a surprise to find him choosing to write in this most demanding of classical forms. Early audiences were baffled. Reviewers used words like “fantastic” and “oriental,” and Debussy’s friend Ernest Chausson confessed mystification. Debussy must have felt the sting of these reactions, for he promised Chausson: “Well, I’ll write another for you...and I’ll try to bring more dignity to the form.”

But Debussy did not write another string quartet, and his *Quartet in G Minor* has become one of the cornerstones of the quartet literature. The entire quartet grows directly out of its first theme, presented at the very opening, and this sharply rhythmic figure returns in various shapes in all four movements, taking on a different character, a different color, and a different harmony on each reappearance. What struck early audiences as “fantastic” now seems an utterly original conception of what a string quartet might be. Here is a combination of energy, drama, thematic imagination, and attention to color never heard before in a string quartet. Debussy may have felt pushed to apologize for a lack of “dignity” in this music, but we value it today just for that failure.

Those who think of Debussy as the composer of misty impressionism are in for a shock with his quartet, for it has the most slashing, powerful opening Debussy ever wrote: his marking for the beginning is “Animated and very resolute.” This first theme, with its characteristic triplet spring, is the backbone of the entire quartet: the singing second theme grows directly out of this opening (though the third introduces new material). The development is marked by powerful accents, long crescendos, and shimmering colors as this movement drives to an unrelenting close in G minor.

The *Scherzo* may well be the quartet’s most impressive movement. Against powerful pizzicato chords, Debussy sets the viola’s bowed theme, a transformation of the quartet’s opening figure; soon this is leaping between all four voices. The recapitulation of this movement, in 15/8 and played entirely pizzicato, bristles with rhythmic energy, and the music then fades away to a beautifully understated close. Debussy marks the third movement “Gently expressive,” and this quiet music is so effective that it is sometimes used as an encore piece. It is in ABA form: the opening section is muted, while the more animated middle is played without mutes—the quartet’s open-

ing theme reappears subtly in this middle section. Debussy marks the ending, again played with mutes, “As quiet as possible.”

The finale begins slowly but gradually accelerates to the main tempo, “Very lively and with passion.” As this music proceeds, the quartet’s opening theme begins to appear in a variety of forms: first in a misty, distant statement marked “soft and expressive,” then gradually louder and louder until it returns in all its fiery energy, stamped out in double-stops by the entire quartet. A propulsive coda drives to the close, where the first violin flashes upward across three octaves to strike the powerful G major chord that concludes this most undignified—and most wonderful—piece of music.

String Quartet in F Major

MAURICE RAVEL
(1875–1937)

Ravel wrote his only string quartet in 1902–3, while still a student at the Paris Conservatory, and the first performance was given by the Heymann Quartet on March 5, 1904, two days before the composer’s twenty-ninth birthday. Ravel’s quartet is in many ways similar to the Debussy quartet, written in 1893—there are parallels between the structure, rhythmic shape, and mood of the two works—but Ravel dedicated his quartet “To my dear teacher Gabriel Fauré,” who was directing Ravel’s work at the Conservatory.

One of the most distinctive features of Ravel’s quartet is its cyclic deployment of themes: the first movement’s two main themes return in various forms in the other three movements, giving the quartet a tight sense of unity. Some have charged that such repetition precludes sufficient thematic variety, but Ravel subtly modifies the color, harmony, and mood of each reappearance of these themes so that from this unity comes enormous variety.

The first movement is marked *Allegro moderato*, but Ravel specifies that it should also be *Très doux* (“Very gentle”). The calm first subject is heard immediately in the first violin over a rising accompaniment in the other voices, and this leads—after some spirited extension—to the haunting second theme, announced by the first violin and viola, two octaves apart. The relatively brief development rises to a huge climax—Ravel marks it triple *forte*—before the movement subsides to close with its opening theme, now gracefully elongated, fading gently into silence.

The second movement, *Assez vif—Très*

rythmé, is a scherzo in ternary form. The opening is a *tour de force* of purely pizzicato writing that makes the quartet sound like a massive guitar. Some of this movement’s rhythmic complexity comes from Ravel’s use of multiple meters. The tempo indication is 6/8(3/4), and while the first violin is accented in 3/4 throughout, the other voices are frequently accented in 6/8, with the resulting cross-rhythms giving the music a pleasing vitality. The slow center section is a subtle transformation of the first movement’s second theme. At the conclusion of this section comes one of the quartet’s most brilliant passages, the bridge back to the opening material. Here the pizzicato resumes quietly, gathers speed and force, and races upward to launch the return of the movement’s opening theme. This is wonderful writing for quartet, and the scherzo drives straight to its explosive pizzicato cadence.

The third movement—*Très lent*—is in free form, and perhaps the best way to understand this movement is to approach it as a rhapsody based loosely on themes from the first movement. Beneath these themes Ravel sets a rhythmic cell of three notes that repeats constantly, but it remains an accompaniment figure rather than becoming an active thematic participant. The movement’s impression of freedom results in no small part from its frequent changes of both key and meter.

After the serene close of the third movement, the fourth—*Agité*—leaps almost abrasively to life. Agitated it certainly is, an effect that comes from its steadily-driving double-stroked passages, and this mood continues across the span of the movement. The basic metric unit here is the rapid 5/8 heard at the beginning, though Ravel changes meter frequently, with excursions into 3/4 and 5/4. Once again, material from the first movement returns, and after several lyric interludes the finale takes on once again the aggressive mood of its opening and powers its way to the close.

Ravel’s quartet generated a mixed reaction at its premiere in 1904. One of those most critical was the dedicatee, Gabriel Fauré, who was especially bothered by the unorthodox finale, which he thought “stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure.” But when Ravel, troubled by such criticism, turned to Debussy for his estimation, the latter offered the best possible response: “In the name of the gods of Music and for my sake personally, do not touch a note of what you have written.”

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PROGRAM NOTES OCTOBER 22

String Quartet No. 1 in G Minor, Opus 13 FS4

CARL NIELSEN
(1865–1931)

Some composers (Mozart and Mendelssohn come to mind) appear almost to have been born knowing how to write music. Other composers (Beethoven and Elgar) struggled for years to master their craft and achieve success. Carl Nielsen belonged to the latter group. Born into a family who lived in near-poverty in rural Denmark (his father was a house painter), the boy helped support his family by herding geese during school vacations. Nielsen was drawn to music from an early age: his family became aware of his talent when they watched him beat out rhythms on logs using sticks. He learned to play the violin and piano as a small boy, and by 15 he played the cornet in a military band. But he wanted to write his own music, and he was able to attend the Copenhagen Conservatory only because of the support of friends in his hometown. He graduated in 1886 and then struggled to make his way as a composer. Financial security came in 1889 when—at age 24—he joined the Royal Danish Opera Orchestra as a violinist. That job paid the bills, but it was killing work, and he would remain in the orchestra for 16 years until—at age 40—he had become successful enough as a composer that he could support himself and his family through his own music.

Nielsen sketched several string quartets while still a teenager, but he did not compose his official first string quartet—the first one he allowed to be published—until he was 22. Nielsen composed his *String Quartet No. 1 in G Minor* between December 1887 and February 1888. We may think of Nielsen as a twentieth-century composer, but when he wrote this string quartet, Brahms, Bruckner, and Tchaikovsky were still active, and Liszt had been dead for only a year. So it is not surprising that the idiom of this music is still fairly conservative, and this quartet is noteworthy not for any striking innovations but for its high energy level and for Nielsen's accomplished writing for strings.

The quartet is in the expected four movements, and they are all in traditional forms: a sonata-form opening movement, a ternary-form slow movement, a scherzo

and trio, and a vigorous finale that recalls themes heard in earlier movements. Nielsen's marking for the first movement, *Allegro energico*, is exactly right, because this is indeed a high-energy movement. From its insistent and driving opening, this music is built on busy textures, athletic themes, and rapid interchanges between the instruments. The first violin states the first theme immediately, and the cello quickly announces the second. These are treated to a full-throated development and a soaring recapitulation, so that after all this energy the very ending brings a surprise: its energy exhausted, the movement concludes on a *pianissimo* chord.

While Nielsen marks the second movement *Andante amoroso*, this music does not seem in any way a love song. First violin sings the broad-spanned opening melody (the meter here is 9/8), and all seems set for a lyric slow movement, but now Nielsen springs a surprise in this “slow” movement. Suddenly the music accelerates into a violent section marked *Agitato*, and only gradually does it make its way back to the calm opening material, now marked *molto tranquillo*.

After the quiet conclusion of the slow movement, the *Scherzo*, set in 6/8 rather than the expected 3/4, erupts with energy. At the trio section Nielsen moves into G major, and the first violin sings a bucolic tune whose many open E-string notes give this music the flavor of country fiddling. But this does not last for long: back comes the vigorous scherzo, and a powerful coda drives the movement to its emphatic final chord.

The finale brings further surprises. Nielsen stresses that he wants the performance to be inquieto, and suddenly we find ourselves back in the G-minor intensity of the first movement. As the finale nears its conclusion, Nielsen creates a section he titles *Resumé*, and here he recalls themes from the first and third movements and weaves them into the busy textures of this music. It makes for a grand conclusion to a very impressive piece of music by a very young composer.

String Quartet in D Minor, Opus 56 “Voces intimae”

JEAN SIBELIUS
(1865–1957)

We automatically think of Sibelius as the composer of orchestral music, and his reputation continues to rest squarely on his symphonies, tone poems, and *Violin Concerto*. Yet it is surprising that Sibelius

was not drawn more to chamber music. He was an accomplished violinist, and as a very young man he wrote a number of chamber works, including (when he was about 20) three string quartets. But there is only one significant piece of chamber music from his artistic maturity, the *String Quartet in D Minor*, composed in 1908–9 between the *Third* and *Fourth Symphonies*. The quartet shows some unusual features. It is in five movements rather than the expected four, and there are thematic links between the movements. The quartet also has the nickname *Voces intimae* (“Intimate Voices”), which originated with the composer himself. That nickname has, however, been a source of uncertainty, for there seems to be no explicit program behind this music. A quartet with a similar nickname, Janáček's *Second Quartet* (subtitled “Intimate Pages”), is fired in every measure by that aging composer's love for a young woman, but there is no such message in this music, which remains abstract throughout. At one point in a copy of the score to the third movement, Sibelius penciled “*Voces intimae*” over three hushed chords, and this remains our only clue to the meaning of the enigmatic nickname.

Listeners who know Sibelius' symphonies will recognize many of their trademarks here: murmuring pedals, long crescendos, rhetorical outbursts, and sustained passages of unison writing. But there are many more passages of true chamber music: music of inward character, created by a partnership of equals and of a truly intimate sonority. The quartet is built on an arch structure worthy of mature Bartók: two big outer movements (sonata form and rondo) form the anchors, while the even-numbered movements are both powerful scherzos. These surround a lengthy *Adagio di molto* that is, musically and emotionally, the capstone of the arch.

The slow introduction to the first movement, for first violin and cello alone, provides a basic theme-shape, and at the *Allegro molto moderato* the entire quartet takes up this idea, yet at a speed only slightly faster than the introduction. This animated sonata-form movement leads without pause into the second movement, marked *Vivace*, which is derived from the first movement's themes. This pulsing, driving scherzo—a superb movement—divides into smaller sections in different keys; so closely related is this movement to the first that Sibelius referred to it as movement “one-and-a-half.” The central *Adagio di*
continued on page 7

molto has a yearning, striving quality that grows directly out of its constantly driving upward; along the way the listener will make out the three separate chords—first in E minor and then in C-sharp minor—over which Sibelius inscribed the enigmatic “Voces intimae.” The fourth movement, a firm-ribbed and declarative *Allegretto*, is followed by the rondo-finale, which has some of the character of a perpetual-motion movement and finally drives to a near-symphonic close.

Sibelius himself was quite pleased with this quartet. In a diary entry in July 1909, six months after its completion, he wrote: “Believe me, with the quartet I have left the training ship and gained my master’s certificate. Now I shall set course for the open sea. You’ve achieved something!”

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger