



SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

ALEXANDER STRING QUARTET | Ensemble-in-Residence

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Yuna Lee | Violin

David Samuel | Viola
Sandy Wilson | Cello

Friday, September 29, 2023 | 7:00pm

Herbst Theatre

Tonight the Alexander String Quartet celebrates its 35th year in residence with San Francisco Performances.

RAVEL

String Quartet in F Major

Allegro moderato. Très doux
Assez vif. Très rythmé
Très lent
Vif et agité

PAUSE

SHOSTAKOVICH

String Quartet No. 2 in A Major, Opus 68

Overture. Moderato con moto
Recitative and Romance. Adagio
Valse. Allegro
Theme and Variations. Adagio

The **Alexander String Quartet** is Ensemble-in-Residence with San Francisco Performances.

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.

A Felicitous Collaboration: Thirty-Five Years with the Alexander String Quartet



Photo: Martyn Selman

For 35 years, thousands of audience members have enjoyed Saturday-morning musical conversations with Ensemble-in-Residence, the Alexander String Quartet (ASQ) and Music Historian-in-Residence Robert Greenberg. This fascinating series is the result of an unprecedented partnership. “It began in the late 80’s,” says Founder and President Emeritus Ruth Felt. “Jane Galante, of the Morrison Trust, talked with me about her goal of having a resident string quartet in San Francisco. I also thought a resident quartet would be great for SF Performances and could establish the beginning of an arts education program.” A joint national search soon identified the Alexander String Quartet, a young and internationally acclaimed ensemble.

In its first season, 1989–90, the New York-based Quartet was in San Francisco for eight weeks. The ASQ’s openness to working in high schools, and to designing a curriculum combining music with other subjects, helped to fulfill a need in the SFUSD’s deeply ravaged music education program. The first year was highly successful and the residency was expanded to additional schools in need. Following that, the ASQ relocated to San Francisco in order to dedicate most of their non-touring time to the residency.

Adult music education soon followed. Inspired by a popular series in Paris, Felt proposed a weekend morning series. The ASQ invited musicologist/composer Robert Greenberg to cre-

ate lectures about the socio-political context of Beethoven’s works. The series grew quickly and in 2003 it moved to the larger Herbst Theatre from the Cowell Theater at Fort Mason. In addition to Beethoven, over the years the series has explored the work of Haydn, Bartók and Shostakovich, among many others, including this season’s continued exploration of composers from the early 20th century.

The success of the series has always been due to its uniqueness. The non-traditional performance time, the in-depth exploration of the lives and historical context of composers, and the on- and off-stage chemistry between the quartet and Bob Greenberg have made it a one-of-a-kind experience for audiences. According to Greenberg, “The series has taken on a lovely life of its own. We have a loyal following, we can do almost any music and they’ll come.”

The Alexander String Quartet continues to thrive today, with new members and a fresh outlook on performing and recording great chamber music, often in partnership with other artists. As *SF Classical Voice* recently wrote about their collaboration with guitarist William Kanengiser, “The result is breathtakingly fresh and emotionally touching...The Alexander Quartet is magnificent in matching Kanengiser’s expertise in this compelling and unusual music, and they seemed to enjoy themselves a great deal...[a] felicitous collaboration.”

ENSEMBLE PROFILE

The Alexander String Quartet celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2021. The Quartet has been Ensemble-in-Residence since 1989 with San Francisco Performances. 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.

The Alexander String Quartet stands among the world's premier ensembles, having performed in the major music capitals of five continents. The quartet is a vital artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble in Residence of San Francisco Performances. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, and Shostakovich, the quartet's recordings have won international critical acclaim. Founded in New York City in 1981, the ensemble quickly captured attention, initially winning the Concert Artists Guild Competition in 1982, and then becoming the first American quartet to win the London (now Wigmore) International String Quartet Competition in 1985. The members of the Alexander String Quartet are recipients of honorary degrees from Allegheny College and St. Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY).

Since its inception, the Alexander String Quartet has maintained an unyielding and passionate commitment to education. For decades, the ensemble has trained generations of gifted performers, emerging string quartets, and talented young musicians destined to pass on their knowledge and love of music as teachers in schools across the globe. The 2023–24 season marks the beginning of a new initiative that brings together the quartet's expertise in education and devotion to its community. Partnering with schools, arts organizations, and community institutions in the Bay Area and beyond, the Alexander String Quartet will be hosting a series of innovative workshops, performances and collaborations that are designed to support and bolster chamber music awareness and edu-

cation for individuals from all walks of life.

The Alexander String Quartet has performed at Lincoln Center, the 92nd Street Y, the Metropolitan Museum, Jordan Hall, the Library of Congress, and appeared as guests at universities including Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Lewis & Clark, UCLA, and many more. Numerous overseas tours include the U.K., the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, France, Greece, the Republic of Georgia, Argentina, Panama, 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*.

Joyce Yang, Marc-André Hamelin, Richard Stoltzman, Joyce DiDonato, Midori, Lynn Harrell, Branford Marsalis, David Sánchez, Jake Heggie, Augusta Read Thomas, Tarik O'Regan, Wayne Peterson, and Samuel Carl Adams are only a few of the many distinguished instrumentalists, singers, and composers with whom the Alexander String Quartet has collaborated in performance and recording projects crossing genres from classical to jazz, rock, and folk in its more than four decades of music making. Their most recent collaborative project, "British Invasion," brings the Quartet together with guitarist William Kanengiser to explore the music of Sting, Led Zeppelin, John Dowland, and the Beatles by way of contemporary composers Ian Krouse, Dušan Bogdanović, and Leo Brouwer. The quartet continues to enjoy a longstanding collaboration with the richly entertaining composer-lecturer, Robert Greenberg, with whom it presents series of concerts every season with San Francisco Performances and at the Mondavi Center at the University of California in Davis. These concerts, which have also reached audiences at the Library of Congress in Washington, Merkin Concert Hall in New York, and many other venues, provide a deep dive into the history and essence of the works being presented in addition to a full performance of each piece.

Recording for the Foghorn Classics label, the Alexander String Quartet's extensive recording catalogue includes complete string quartet cycles by Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms, Kodály, and Shostakovich. Their most recent release is the third installment of a Mozart chamber music project, *Apotheosis Volume 3*, featuring the string quintets of Mozart with violist Paul Yarbrough. *Apotheosis Volumes 1 & 2*, released in 2018 and 2019, featured the late string quartets

and piano quartets (with Joyce Yang) of Mozart. Both recordings received critical acclaim ("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 recordings include the 2020 release of the Mozart and Brahms clarinet quintets (with Eli Eban) and the 2019 release, *Locale*, featuring Dvořák's "American" quartet and piano quintet (with Joyce Yang). Their recording catalogue also includes the Mahler Song Cycles in transcriptions for mezzo-soprano (with Kindra Scharich) and string quartet by the Quartet's first violinist, Zakarias Grafilo.

The Alexander String Quartet performs on Michael Fischer and unlabeled circa 1800 Italian violins, a Hiroshi Iizuka viola, and a Francis M. Kuttner cello. They have also had the distinct honor on numerous occasions to record and perform on a matched set of instruments known as the Ellen M. Egger Quartet, made in San Francisco by the late Francis M. Kuttner.

PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in F Major

MAURICE RAVEL
(1875–1937)

Ravel wrote his only string quartet in 1902–03, 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.”

String Quartet No. 2, in A Major, Opus 68

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
(1906–1975)

The works Shostakovich composed during World War II—or, as the Russians call it, The Great Patriotic War—form a distinct chapter in his output. These include the wartime music one might expect—marches, choruses, and even settings of songs of Russia's allies (including, in 1943, an arrangement of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*)—but Shostakovich made his major wartime statements in classical forms. The wide expressive range of these works is best outlined by the path from the “Leningrad” Symphony of 1941—a popular, heroic, and somewhat bombastic work—to the *Eighth Symphony* of 1943, searing, painful music that is a more direct response to the war. Shostakovich also wrote two chamber works during the war, both composed at the retreat the Soviet Union maintained for its composers in the forest of Ivanovo, north of Moscow. The *Piano Trio No. 2* and the *String Quartet No. 2* were composed during the summer of 1944 and premiered at the same concert in Leningrad on November 12 of that year.

These two works come from the darker side of Shostakovich's wartime experience. The *Trio* is one of his finest and most frequently performed works. It was composed at just the point advancing Soviet soldiers had begun to discover the atrocities that had been committed against Russian Jews by the Nazis, and some of that makes its way into the trio's harrowing final movement, which is based on what Shostakovich himself called a “Jewish theme.” The character of *String Quartet No. 2* is more elusive, and it has remained one of the least known of the cycle of Shostakovich's 15 string quartets. This quartet

makes no direct reference to the war. There are no music quotations, no subtitle, no connections by Shostakovich himself to the events swirling about him as he composed it. Yet this is big music (nearly 35 minutes long), dark, powerful, at times dissonant, and it is hard not to feel some of the same spirit in this quartet that runs through the *Eighth Symphony* and *Second Piano Trio*.

The quartet is in the expected four movements, and at first glance these seem fairly conventional: a sonata-form first movement, a slow movement, a dance movement, and a theme-and-variation finale. But none of these movements is quite what one expects, and the impact of this music is unsettling rather than reassuring.

Each of the movements has a title. The opening *Overture*, in sonata form, employs thematic material that can turn aggressive and dissonant, and it drives to a conclusion that relaxes none of its tensions. The *Recitative and Romance* opens with a long fantasia by the first violin over unbarred chordal accompaniment; its central episode, reflective at first, gradually turns strident before the return of the opening recitative. The *Waltz* is muted throughout. Second violin and viola pulse a ghostly suggestion of the waltz rhythm, and the cello quickly sings the sinuous waltz tune. This waltz offers several episodes in different characters and keys, some of them quite busy, before the return of the opening material and a quiet close. The variation finale opens with a slow, rising-and-falling theme-shape. This shape then crystalizes into the viola's lengthy solo statement (quite “Russian”-sounding), and four extended variations follow at different speeds. The writing can be virtuosic here, and at moments some of the aggressive character of the opening movement reappears. At the end, the slow theme-shape from the movement's opening returns, and the quartet closes on a full-throated restatement of the variation theme and a firm A-minor chord.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger