

presents...

ROBERT GREENBERG | Music Historian-in-Residence

ESMÉ QUARTET

Wonhee Bae | Violin
Yuna Ha | Violin

Dimitri Murrath | Viola
Yeeun Heo | Cello

Saturday, September 27, 2025 | 10am

Saturday, October 18, 2025 | 10am

Herbst Theatre

September 27

SCHUBERT

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

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro molto

Presto

October 18

SCHUBERT

Quartettsatz

String Quartet in A Minor, D. 804

Allegro ma non troppo

Andante

Menuetto. Allegretto

Allegro moderato

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

**The September 27 program is made possible in part by the generous support of
Bruce and Carolyn Lowenthal.**

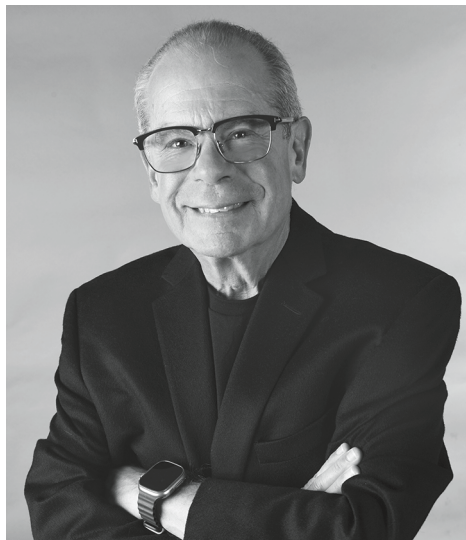
Robert Greenberg robertgreenbergmusic.com

Esmé Quartet is represented by Christina Daysog Concert Artists
PO Box 529, Alameda, CA 94501 daysogconcertartists.com

ARTIST PROFILES

Robert Greenberg became San Francisco Performances' Music Historian-in-Residence in 1994 and for 30 years offered a Saturday morning lecture series with the Alexander String Quartet.

Esmé Quartet made their San Francisco Performances debut in October 2024.



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 Library 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.



Praised for their warm sound and commanding stage presence, the **Esmé Quartet** has quickly established itself as one of the most captivating chamber ensembles of its generation. Formed in 2016 in Cologne, Germany, by four Korean musicians and lifelong friends, the quartet is driven by a deep artistic connection and a shared passion for music and the arts.

The ensemble garnered international acclaim after winning First Prize and four special awards at the 2018 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition in London. That same year, they were named HSBC Laureates of the Académie du Festival d'Aix. Additional honors include top prizes at the Trondheim International Chamber Music Competition, the Possehl Musikpreis Lübeck, and the inaugural Hans Gál Prize by the Academy of Sciences and Literature Mainz and Villa Musica Germany.

The Esmé Quartet has performed at major venues and festivals across Europe, North America, and Asia, including the Lucerne Festival, Wigmore Hall, Opéra de Lille, L'Auditori Barcelona, Hong Kong Arts Festival, and the Aix-en-Provence Festival. They were the first Artists-in-Residence at Lotte Concert Hall in Seoul for the 2020–2021 season and have appeared in residencies at the McGill International String Quartet Academy, Classic Esterházy, and the Heidelberg String Quartet Festival.

In recent seasons, the quartet made acclaimed debut tours of North America, Japan, and Australia. Highlights include performances of John Adams' *Absolute Jest* with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra (with John Adams conducting), and Gyeonggi Philharmonic. Their collaborations also include a multimedia project, *The book of water* by Michel van der Aa with British actor Samuel West at the Hong Kong Arts Festival and a North American tour with Van Cliburn Gold Medalist Yekwon Sunwoo.

The quartet's discography on Alpha Classics includes *To Be Loved* (2020), named one of the best classical albums of the year by WQXR as well as five stars review by Diapason, *Yessori: Sound from the Past* (2023), and a 2024 Apple Music Classical Sessions EP of Mendelssohn's Op. 13. A third album celebrating their 10th anniversary will be released in 2026.

Belgian-American violist Dimitri Murath joined the ensemble in 2023, succeeding founding member Jiwon Kim.

From the 2025–26 season, the Esmé Quartet will be based in San Francisco as ensemble-in-residence with San Francisco Performances, where they will present a Schubert quartet cycle in collaboration with noted musicologist and host Robert Greenberg. Concurrently, the quartet members will serve as visiting artists and faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The season also features the quartet's highly anticipated New York debut at The Frick Collection, continued tours across North America and Europe, and will culminate in a special 10th anniversary celebration concert at the Seoul Arts Center in June 2026.

The quartet has worked closely with esteemed mentors including Günter Pichler, Oliver Wille, Eberhard Feltz, Christoph Poppen, Jonathan Brown, and Heime Müller.

Their name, Esmé, derives from the Old French word for "beloved."

PROGRAM NOTES SEPTEMBER 27

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 *Erlkönig*. 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

PROGRAM NOTES OCTOBER 18

Quartettsatz in C Minor, D. 703

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797–1828)

Schubert composed the *Quartettsatz*—that title, which did not originate with Schubert, means simply "quartet movement"—in De-

ember 1820, when he was just a few weeks short of his twenty-fourth birthday. He had apparently planned to write a standard four-movement quartet but completed only the first movement and a 41-measure fragment of what would have been an *Andante* second movement. No one knows why he set so promising a work aside and left it unfinished, but—like the “*Unfinished*” *Symphony*—what survives is significant enough by itself to stand as a satisfying whole.

Curiously, the *Allegro assai* opening movement of this quartet is similar to the first movement of the “*Unfinished*” *Symphony*: both feature the same sort of double-stroked opening idea in the first violins, both are built on unusually lyric ideas, and both offer unexpected key relations between the major theme-groups. In fact, the key relationships are one of the most remarkable aspects of the quartet: it begins in C minor with the first violin’s racing, nervous theme, and this quickly gives way to the lyric second idea in A-flat major, which Schubert marks *dolce*. The quiet third theme—a rocking, flowing melody—arrives in G major. As one expects in Schubert’s mature music (and the 23-year-old who wrote this music was a mature composer), keys change with consummate ease, though one surprise is that the opening idea does not reappear until the coda, where it returns in the closing instants to hurl the movement to its fierce conclusion.

Listed as the twelfth of Schubert’s fifteen string quartets, the *Quartettsatz* is generally acknowledged as the first of his mature quartets. The first eleven had been written as *Hausmusik* for a quartet made up of members of Schubert’s own family: his brothers played the violins, his father the cello, and the composer the viola. Because he was writing for amateur musicians in those quartets, Schubert had kept the demands on the players relatively light—his cellist-father in particular was given a fairly easy part in those quartets. But in the *Quartettsatz* and the three magnificent final quartets Schubert felt no such restrictions. The *Quartettsatz*, which makes enormous technical demands (including virtuoso runs for the first violin that whip upward over a span of three octaves), was clearly intended for professional performers.

String Quartet in A Minor, D. 804

The year 1823 was devastating for Schubert. He had become ill the previous fall (every indication is that he had contracted syphilis), and by May he had to be

hospitalized. Much weakened, and with his head shaved as part of the hospital treatment, he required the rest of the year simply to regain strength to function, and early in 1824 he turned to chamber music. His friend Franz von Schober described him in February: “Schubert now keeps a fortnight’s fast and confinement. He looks much better and is very bright, very comically hungry and writes quartets and German dances and variations without number.” But—despite Schober’s hopes—Schubert had not made a triumphant return to life and strength. Instead, he entered the new year with the bittersweet knowledge that although he may have survived that first round of illness, he would never be fully well again.

Schober was right, though, that his friend had returned to composing with chamber music. Schubert first wrote the *Octet*, and then in February and March 1824 he composed two extraordinary quartets: the *Quartet in A Minor* heard on this program and the *Quartet in D Minor*, nicknamed “*Death and the Maiden*.” The *Quartet in A Minor* was first performed on March 14 by a quartet led by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, one of Beethoven’s close friends. It is nearly impossible to define the quality that makes this quartet—and much of Schubert’s late music—so moving. His lyricism has now been transformed by a new emotional maturity, and a quality of wistfulness, almost sadness, seems to touch even the music’s happiest moments. Schubert’s biographer Brian Newbould draws attention to the fact that this quartet takes some of its themes from Schubert’s own songs, and the texts of those songs furnish a clue to the quartet’s emotional content. This music is also full of harmonic surprises (keys change suddenly, almost like shifts of light) and is marked by a complex and assured development of themes. The *Quartet in A Minor* may lack the dramatic, hard-edged impact of “*Death and the Maiden*,” but many consider it Schubert’s finest quartet.

From its first instant, the *Allegro ma non troppo* shows the hand of a master. The accompaniment—a sinuous, winding second violin line over pulsing viola and cello—is static, and Newbould points out that this is precisely the form of the accompaniment of Schubert’s great song “Gretchen am Spinnrade” (1814), which begins with the words *Meine Ruh’ ist hin*: “My peace is gone, My Heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore.” Over this, the first violin’s long-lined main melody seems to

float endlessly, beginning to develop and change harmonically even before it has been fully stated. The remarkable thing about this “lyric” theme is that it can be developed so effectively as an “instrumental” theme: its long flow of melody is finally interrupted by a fierce trill motto in the lower strings that will figure importantly in the development. A second theme, shared by the two violins, is similar in character to the opening idea, and this movement—which arcs over a very long span—finally concludes with the trill motto.

Listeners will recognize the theme of the *Andante* as a Schubert favorite, though this one is not from a song: he had already used this poised melody in his incidental music to *Rosamunde* and would later use it in one of the piano *Impromptus*. This song-like main idea remains simple throughout (it develops by repetition), but the accompaniment grows more and more complex, and soon there are swirling voices and off-the-beat accents beneath the gentle melody.

The *Menuetto* opens with a three-note figure from the cello’s deep register, and that dark, expectant sound gives this movement its distinct character. Newbould notes that Schubert took the theme of the trio section from his 1819 song “*Die Götter Griechenlands*,” where it sets Schiller’s nostalgic lament *Schöne Welt, wo bist du?*: “Beautiful world, where are you?” The minuet returns, and this movement dances solemnly to its close.

The A-major tonality of the finale may come as a surprise, given the gravity of the first three movements, but it does make an effective conclusion. This *Allegro moderato* is a rondo in which all three themes have a dancing character, though at moments one feels the wistfulness of the earlier movements creeping into the music’s otherwise carefree progress. Full of energy, this movement is also marked by Schubert’s careful attention to detail: in the parts, he notes with unusual care the phrasing, accents, and dynamic shadings and contrasts that give this music its rich variety.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger