



SAN FRANCISCO
PERFORMANCES

presents...

Alexander String Quartet

Zakarias Grafilo | Violin
Paul Yarbrough | Viola

Frederick Lifszitz | Violin
Sandy Wilson | Cello

Eli Eban | Clarinet

Recorded at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church,
Belvedere, CA, June 10–14, 2019

BRAHMS

Quintet in B minor for Clarinet and Strings, Op. 115

Allegro

Adagio

Andantino—Presto non assai, ma con sentimento

Con moto

Tracks from the upcoming Foghorn Classics release: *Brahms & Mozart Clarinet Quintets*

Produced, engineered and mastered by Matt Carr

Instruments:

Clarinet: Handmade by Luis Rossi, Chile

Quartet: Ellen M. Quartet, all by Francis Kuttner, 1987

Bows by Arcus

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Having celebrated its 35th Anniversary in 2016, the **Alexander String Quartet** has performed in the major music capitals of five continents, securing its standing among the world's premier ensembles. Widely admired for its interpretations of Beethoven, Mozart, Shostakovich, and Brahms, the quartet's recordings of the Beethoven cycle (twice), Bartók and Shostakovich cycles have won international critical acclaim. The quartet has also established itself as an important advocate of new music through more than 30 commissions from such composers as Jake Heggie, Cindy Cox, Augusta Read Thomas, Robert Greenberg, Martin Bresnick, Cesar Cano, and Pulitzer Prize-winner Wayne Peterson. The ASQ's new release with mezzo-soprano Kindra Scharich—*Mahler Song Cycles*, transcribed for string quartet by Zakarias Grafilo—has received rapturous critical notices. Samuel Carl Adams' new *Quintet with Pillars* was premiered and widely performed by ASQ with pianist Joyce Yang across the U.S. during the spring of 2019 and will be introduced to European audiences in the forthcoming 2020–21 season.

The Alexander String Quartet is a major artistic presence in its home base of San Francisco, serving since 1989 as Ensemble in Residence of San Francisco Performances. The ASQ is in residence at San Francisco State University

where they are members of the string faculty in the School of Music and instructional faculty at the Morrison Chamber Music Center.

Among the fine musicians with whom ASQ has collaborated are pianists Roger Woodward, Anne-Marie McDermott, Menachem Pressler, Marc-André Hamelin, and Jeremy Menuhin; clarinetists Eli Eban, Joan Enric Lluna, David Shifrin, and Richard Stoltzman; soprano Elly Ameling; mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato; violinist Midori; cellists Lynn Harrell, Sadao Harada, and David Requiro; violist Toby Appel; 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 performs numerous lecture-concerts annually with composer-lecturer Robert Greenberg.

The Alexander String Quartet was formed in New York City in 1981 and captured international attention as the first American quartet to win the London [now Wigmore] International String Quartet Competition in 1985. Recipients of honorary degrees from Allegheny College and Saint Lawrence University, and Presidential medals from Baruch College (CUNY), ASQ is the subject of an award-winning documentary, *Con Moto: The Alexander String Quartet* (2017).



Eli Eban was appointed principal clarinetist of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra under Lukas Foss immediately after graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music. Shortly thereafter he joined the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at the invitation of Zubin Mehta. During thirteen seasons with the Israel Philharmonic, he performed and recorded all the major orchestral repertoire with the world's leading conductors, including Claudio Abbado, Leonard Bernstein, Christoph von Dohnanyi, Charles Dutoit, Christoph Eschenbach, James Levine, Kurt Masur, Simon Rattle, Georg Solti, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Lorin Maazel.

Eban was the featured soloist with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra on many occasions, and he has also performed concertos with the English Chamber Orchestra, the Salzburg Camerata Academica, the City of London Sinfonia, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, Louisville Orchestra, and the Israel Camerata/Jerusalem, among others. He tours extensively as a chamber musician, collaborating with renowned artists and ensembles. He has been guest artist with the Alexander, Audubon, Orion, St. Petersburg, Tel Aviv and Ying quartets and was a frequent participant of the famed Marlboro Music Festival. While at Marlboro, Eban was selected by legendary violinist Sandor Vegh to be the first wind player to perform at the prestigious IMS Prussia Cove festival in England, drawing acclaim from the *London Guardian* for his "high-powered, electrifying performances." His subsequent recordings for Meridian Records, London, were cited by critics as being "full of life and highly sensitive." He has also recorded for the Saphir, Crystal and Naxos labels. He was a member of "Myriad" (a chamber ensemble formed by members of the Cleveland Orchestra) and has often traveled to Eastern Europe to perform and teach at the invitation of the European Mozart Foundation.

Eli Eban was a visiting professor at the Eastman School of Music for two years before joining the faculty of the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, where he holds a distinguished rank Rudy professorship. His former students are pursuing active solo careers and have won orchestral positions in Israel, Denmark, Korea, Poland, Singapore, and South Africa. In the USA they can be heard in the symphony orchestras of Indianapolis, New Mexico, Toledo, the New World Symphony, and in the premier service bands in Washington, D.C. He divides his time between teaching at the Jacobs School of Music, touring as a soloist and chamber musician, and serving as the principal clarinetist of the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. His summers are spent performing and teaching at the Sarasota Music Festival and playing principal clarinet in the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra.

The Ellen M. Egger Quartet of Instruments

The idea of creating a quartet of stringed instruments, the **Ellen M. Egger Quartet**, was born from a conversation with Fritz Maytag and is a working memorial to Fritz's sister Ellen Egger, one of four siblings and an accomplished musician and teacher. The four instruments are loaned individually to promising students in far-flung places for an indefinite period, and then are reassembled once a year for a concert in San Francisco. Memorable performances have taken place at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor with such distinguished quartets as the Angeles Quartet, the Pro Arte Quartet, the Lafayette Quartet, the Pacifica Quartet and the Turtle Island Quartet. In recent years, the Alexander String Quartet has reunited the two violins, viola and cello in performances and in their second recording in 2009 of the complete Beethoven Quartet Cycle.

Francis Kuttner studied violinmaking at the Scuola Internazionale di Liuteria in Cremona, Italy, and worked privately with accomplished violinmaker/woodcarver Francesco Bissolotti, a proponent of traditional Cremonese violinmaking. Working from original Stradivari models and forms provided a comprehensive and insightful method of construction. Kuttner has been awarded numerous Gold and Silver Medals in Paris, New York, Manchester and Cremona. Designated "Hors Concours" by the Violin Society of America, he serves on many international juries. He divides his time between his workshops in Cremona and San Francisco.

The two violins were made on a 1705 Stradivari "P" form.

The viola is made on a personal model.

The violoncello was constructed on a modified "B" form of Antonio Stradivari 1709. The labels are dated 1987.

PROGRAM NOTES

Composers have been drawn to the combination of clarinet and string quartet ever since the clarinet began to take shape in the eighteenth century. The mellow sound and agility of the clarinet make it an ideal complement to the resonant warmth and harmonic richness of the string quartet, and the range of composers who have written for this pairing is extraordinarily diverse, including Weber, Meyerbeer, Reger, Busoni, Hindemith, and—more recently—Carter and Widmann. Yet all these compositions, varied as they are, exist within the shadow of the two towering masterpieces composed for clarinet and string quartet, the quintets of Mozart and Brahms.

And it is quite right that they should be. They are two of the finest chamber works by two of the greatest composers, and there are many parallels between them: both were written late in their creators' lives, both were inspired by contact with a particular clarinetist, and both beautifully integrate the quite different sonorities of clarinet and string quartet. Neither work is in any way valedictory, yet—coming near the end of each composer's life—they represent some of the most refined and expressive music of Mozart and Brahms.

Quintet in B Minor for Clarinet and Strings, Opus 115

Brahms intended that his *Viola Quintet in G Major* of 1890 should be his last work. At age 57, he felt that he was done composing. In December of that year he sent his publisher some corrections to that quintet with a brief message: "With this note you can take leave of my music, because it is high time to stop." But it was not to be. In March 1891 Brahms traveled to Meiningen to hear that orchestra under the direction of Fritz Steinbach, one of the leading interpreters of Brahms' music. And then something entirely unexpected happened: Brahms heard the orchestra's principal clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld perform Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* and Weber's *Clarinet Concerto*. He was so impressed by Mühlfeld's playing that he came out of retirement and wrote four works for Mühlfeld that have become the heart of the clarinet literature.

Mühlfeld (1856–1907) was an interesting musician. He joined the Meiningen orchestra at age 17 as a violinist but taught himself to play clarinet and became the orchestra's principal clarinetist at age 23, later serving as principal of the Bayreuth orchestra. So impressed was Brahms by his playing that he sat for hours listening to him practice and gave Mühlfeld several pet nicknames, including "Fraulein Klarinette," "my dear nightingale," and "my prima-donna." In the summer of 1891, six months after he had officially announced his retirement, Brahms retreated to his favorite summer vacation spot—Bad Ischl, high in the Alpine lake district—and wrote the *Clarinet Trio*, *Opus 114* and the *Quintet*, *Opus 115*; two sonatas for clarinet followed in the summer of 1894. These four pieces, all written for Mühlfeld, were Brahms' final instrumental works.

The *Clarinet Quintet* has been universally acclaimed one of Brahms' late masterpieces. Rather than writing a display piece to spotlight Mühlfeld's playing, Brahms—newly sensi-

tive to the sound and possibilities of the clarinet—carefully integrates it into the texture of the music. This is extremely concentrated music, with materials extended and combined in ingenious ways. Is the very beginning Brahms' act of homage to Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet*? Both quintets begin with the opening idea fully stated by the quartet, and only then does the clarinet rise from the depths, climb into its upper register, and assume its central role. Brahms opens this *Allegro* with a violin duet that hovers uncertainly between D major and B minor—this tonal ambiguity will mark the entire quintet. Brahms introduces all his thematic material in the first moments of this movement: the undulating theme of the first two bars gives way to the slightly swung shape of the third and fourth bars, followed by the clarinet's rising entry in the fifth. These three theme-shapes will appear in some form throughout the entire movement. At the stormy climax, the theme of the first two bars is heard over fierce swirls in the clarinet, and the movement dies away to conclude with the quiet of the beginning.

The *Adagio* is in ABA form, beginning with a simple clarinet theme over quiet accompaniment from the strings. Yet this subdued opening brings extraordinarily complex rhythmic textures. The clarinet sings its simple song in quarter-notes, the first violin (also in quarter-notes) is syncopated against this, the second violin and viola trade the collision of triple and duple pulses, and beneath all this the cello has a complex line all its own—simply holding this music together presents all sorts of challenges for the performers. The middle section brings a sound that is, by Brahmsian standards, exotic. Brahms was very fond of Hungarian gypsy music, and this section, marked *più lento*, shows that influence: the clarinet leaps and swirls while the accompanying strings whirl beneath it (in imitation of the Hungarian cimbalom?) before the opening material returns.

The principal themes of the final two movements are closely related, giving the *Quintet* an even greater feeling of unity. The *Andantino* opens with a breezy, intermezzo-like tune for clarinet, but at the center section—*Presto non assai, con sentimento*—the music rushes ahead impetuously and never returns to the easy flow of the opening material. The finale, like the finale of Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet*, is a set of variations. Marked only *Con moto*, it offers five variations on the opening theme, stated in turn by the violins and clarinet. Of particular interest is the very end, where the final variation gives way to the theme that opened the first movement, and Brahms' *Clarinet Quintet* winds its immensely concentrated way to the quiet unison B that concludes this moving music.

The *Clarinet Quintet* was given its public premiere in Berlin by Mühlfeld and Joseph Joachim's quartet on December 12, 1891, almost a century to the day after Mozart's death. There is no record of the public reactions to the premiere of Mozart's *Quintet* in 1789, but the response to Brahms' was ecstatic, both from critics and the public, and today many consider it the finest of his late works. Brahms was usually the fiercest critic of his own music, but in the face of this glowing reception he relaxed a little and was willing to concede that his *Clarinet Quintet* was a "very decent" piece of music.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger