ARTISTS
St. Lawrence String Quartet
Geoff Nuttall, violin
Owen Dalby, violin
Lesley Robertson, viola
Christopher Costanza, cello
Rev. Professor Jane Shaw, Dean for Religious Life, speaker

PROGRAM
Joseph Haydn: The Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross, op. 51, Hob. III: 50–56 (1787)

Introduction: Maestoso ed adagio
1. Largo: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do
2. Grave e cantabile: Today shalt thou be with me in paradise
3. Grave: Woman, behold thy son
4. Largo: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
5. Adagio: I thirst
6. Lento: It is finished
7. Largo: Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit
Coda: Il terremoto: The earth shook and the rocks split

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms, and unwrap all lozenges prior to the performance. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.
Haydn's The Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross is a startling and original work. Through tone painting, surprising juxtapositions of material, and an extremely varied harmonic palette, the composer was able to express the duality of Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man and to evoke the struggle of his final hours.

In 1785 or 1786, Haydn was commissioned by the cathedral authorities in Cádiz, Spain, to write a new Passion. The piece began its life as an orchestral work, to provide descriptive interludes between the spoken parts of the Good Friday service. In 1787, Haydn transcribed it for string quartet, and finally, in 1795–1796, he made a choral version, which was published in 1801. In the preface to that publication, Haydn wrote:

Some 15 years ago I was requested by a canon of Cádiz to compose instrumental music on The Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross. It was customary at the Cathedral of Cádiz to produce an oratorio every year during Lent, the effect of the performance being not a little enhanced by the following circumstances. The walls, windows, and pillars of the church were hung with black cloth, and only one large lamp hanging from the center of the roof broke the solemn darkness. At midday, the doors were closed and the ceremony began. After a short service, the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced the first of the seven words (or sentences), and delivered a discourse thereon. This ended, he left the pulpit and fell to his knees before the altar. The interval was filled by music. The bishop then in like manner pronounced the second word, then the third, and so on, the orchestra following upon the conclusion of each discourse. My composition was subject to these conditions, and it was no easy task to compose seven Adagios lasting 10 minutes each and to succeed one another without fatiguing the listeners...

The Introduction in D minor sets a tone of passionate intensity and urgency for the entire work through its dramatic silences, its sharp dynamic contrasts, and the prevalence of dotted and double-dotted rhythms. The introduction and the epilogue, which depicts an earthquake, form a narrative frame for the utterances of Christ.

In Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, we first hear the subjective voice of Jesus. As in the following slow movements, the primary musical motive sets the words of the Latin Bible text, and the rest of each piece flows from that vocal impulse. The emphasis here is on sweetness and lyricism, but there are moments when the “Father” motive is intoned with anguish and perhaps even a touch of anger, instead of the serenity that prevails for most of the movement.

In Today shalt thou be with me in paradise, which begins in C minor, the mood is one of resignation. But after a fermata, the music modulates to the relative major (E-flat), and the opening melodic material is used to express a radiant vision of paradise. The development section passes through the dark keys of F minor and G minor before settling into the contemplative repose of C major.

In Woman, behold thy son, the descending two-note motive, much like a sigh, could be heard as a setting of either “woman” or “mother.” It is significant that Christ, already serenely detached from an earthly mother-son relationship, uses the word “mother” only to offer Mary as the mother to all true believers.

In many versions of the Passion, Christ’s anguished question of the following movement, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?, is spoken or sung in Aramaic. That ancient language, presumably the language in which he always spoke, is used rather than a liturgical language or a modern vernacular at this point in order to convey a sense of Jesus at his most subjective and most human. His conflict is expressed by Haydn through ascending sequences of sforzandi in competitive canonic dialogues between the violins and, most remarkably, in a highly chromatic and disjunct cadenza for the first violin.

The dry sound of a pizzicato accompaniment sets the background for I thirst. Christ’s voice (in a sighing two-note figure reminiscent of the Woman motive) is weak by now, and at first we might think that he is resigned to his fate. But after a peaceful cadence, pounding repeated notes, heavy sforzandi in the violins, and an emphatic bass line accompany the wrenching reiterations of the motive. We are reminded once again of Christ the man.

By Consummatum est (It is finished), the struggle is almost over. After the somber opening phrases in G minor, the main motive becomes the bass line for a sublime melody in B-flat major. But in the course of this movement, there are sudden shifts to the minor mode and heavily emphasized unison reiterations of the triad on which the main theme is based.

In the seventh sonata, Christ gives up the ghost, yielding his spirit into God’s hands. The principal motive is strong and noble, striving upward. Haydn’s choice of mutes for this movement cannot simply aim toward...
a contrast of sonic texture; the mutes must represent the weakened voice of the Savior at the end of his ordeal. The separation of the human and divine has come at a tremendous cost, which we are made to feel throughout the entire work. The sense of upheaval is given its most palpable expression in the Earthquake movement, whose jagged unisons, cross-rhythms, and obsessively repeated material create the impression that the natural world is reeling, pulling apart under the weight of humanity’s sin and loss. —Eugene Drucker of the Emerson String Quartet, 2009

ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET
Established in 1989, the St. Lawrence String Quartet has developed an undisputed reputation as a truly world-class chamber ensemble. Called “witty, buoyant, and wickedly attentive” (Montreal Gazette) with a “peerless” sense of ensemble (Financial Times), the quartet is celebrated for its “smoldering intensity” (Washington Post) and “flexibility, dramatic fire, and…hint of rock ‘n roll energy” (Los Angeles Times). The SLSQ performs internationally and has served as ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University since 1998.

The St. Lawrence continues to build its reputation for imaginative and spontaneous music making through an energetic commitment to the great established quartet literature as well as the championing of new works by such composers as John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, Ezequiel Viñao, and Jonathan Berger. Of the ensemble’s collaborations with Adams, the Washington Post asserted, “If good relationships are built on trust, the bond between the St. Lawrence String Quartet and composer John Adams is a marriage made in chamber music heaven.”

In late summer 2015, the quartet toured Europe with the San Francisco Symphony, performing Adams’ Absolute Jest under the baton of conductor Michael Tilson Thomas for audiences in the United Kingdom, Germany, Romania, and Switzerland. Later in the season, the SLSQ performed at Carnegie Hall in New York and in Vancouver and Toronto; Madison, Wisconsin; Worcester, Massachusetts; Eugene, Oregon; and East Lansing, Michigan. Spring highlights included a residency at the University of Maryland and a special Haydn-themed performance at the 92nd Street Y in New York. During the summer season, the SLSQ also continued its long association with Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina.

In recent seasons, the SLSQ has been highlighting first violinist Geoff Nuttall’s admiration for Haydn with a series of concerts in which the foursome explores and unpacks the composer’s string quartets from various perspectives and then performs the works in their entirety. Nuttall, hailed as “the Jon Stewart of chamber music” (New York Times), explains, “To be really devastated by the genius of Haydn’s music, the performers and audiences have to be connected…exploring the material in a really active way.” The quartet will continue to offer these Haydn discovery programs at least through the 2016–17 season.

The quartet’s residency at Stanford includes work with music students as well as extensive collaborations with other faculty and departments, using music to explore myriad topics. Recent collaborations have involved the School of Medicine, the School of Education, and the Law School. In addition to their appointment at Stanford, the members of the SLSQ serve as visiting artists at the University of Toronto. The foursome’s passion for opening up musical arenas to players and listeners alike is evident in the group’s annual summer chamber music seminar at Stanford.

Lesley Robertson and Geoff Nuttall are founding members of the group and hail from Edmonton, Alberta, and London, Ontario, respectively. Christopher Costanza is from Utica, New York, and joined the group in 2003. Owen Dalby, from the San Francisco Bay Area, joined in 2015. All four members of the quartet live and teach at Stanford University.