Sundays with the St. Lawrence

St. Lawrence String Quartet and Stephen Prutsman

WHEN: Sunday, April 29, 2018, 2:30 PM

VENUE: Bing Concert Hall
FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN (1723–1809)
Quartet in C, op. 33 no. 3 (Hob. III. 39) ('The Bird') (1781)

When Haydn published his six Op. 33 quartets in April 1782, they immediately created a buzz amongst a music-loving public hungry for new music. He hadn't written a string quartet for almost a decade. The popularity of Haydn's six quartets, through their winning combination of approachability and high art, is reflected in the various nicknames that have become attached to the music. An early German publication included the picture of an attractive young woman on the frontispiece; the name Jungfernquartette or Maiden Quartets has stuck ever since. In English-speaking countries, however, the name Russian Quartets tends to be used. That's because the quartets were performed at the Vienna Hofburg on Christmas Day 1781 in honor of Grand Duke Paul, the future Russian Tsar.

In the first movement, after a disarmingly simple opening sequence of C major thirds from the two middle instruments, the first violin introduces a high, chirping thematic sequence which is rich in the musical ideas that will drive the movement forward. Haydn immediately repeats the idea, now in D minor, then in G minor, throwing a curve ball at the expected tonality of the movement. Haydn's musical wit continues throughout the movement which is monothematic but, nevertheless, brims with contrast. The slow movement is elegantly drawn on a somewhat hymn-like theme and is, structurally, a distinctive combination of sonata, rondo and

 Artists

St. Lawrence String Quartet
Geoff Nuttall, violin
Owen Dalby, violin
Lesley Robertson, viola
Christopher Costanza, cello

Special guest Stephen Prutsman, piano

Program

Franz Josef Haydn: Quartet in C, op. 33 no. 3 (Hob. III. 39) ('The Bird') (1781)

Allegro moderato
Scherzo: Allegretto
Adagio ma non troppo
Rondo – Presto

R. Murray Schafer: String Quartet No. 3 (1981)

Slowly, but with great passion
Allegro energico
Slow; calm; mystical

— Intermission —

Erich Wolfgang Korngold: Piano Quintet in E, op. 15 (1921)

Mässiges Zeitmass, mit schwungvoll blühendem Ausdruck
Adagio (Mit grösster Ruhe, stets äusserst – ausdruckvoll)
Finale (Gmessem, beinahe pathetisch)

Sundays with the St. Lawrence is presented in partnership with Music at Stanford.

Notes

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PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.
variation. The main theme of the exuberant finale casts a glance backwards to some of the spirited bird-like violin writing of the opening movement. Almost everything in this delightful movement seems calculated to bring a smile to the face, from the lively banter between instruments and pairs of instruments, to the Turkish flavoring of the refrain, the rustic ‘Hungarian’ episode and an almost throwaway ending.

R. MURRAY SCHAFER (B. 1933)
String Quartet No. 3 (1981)

Murray Schafer’s 13 string quartets are the most significant body of chamber music written by a Canadian composer. Written in 1981 for the Orford Quartet, the Third Quartet begins with an intense, exotic rhapsody, played by the solo cello, alone on stage. The other three players start from different points in the concert hall and, as they gradually converge, arguing violently and consciously avoiding gestures in harmony with one another, the movement ends. In the second movement, the four performers do play together as one quartet. But Schafer also instructs them to expand their instrumental gestures with shouted vocalizations. These are “like the vocal shouts of karate,” Schafer says and they are not to be superimposed on the string music. Instead, the shouts grow out of the physical impulse that produces the string tone. The second movement is highly energetic. At one point, it settles momentarily into a slow waltz tempo. Elsewhere, it is the music of warring samurai or, perhaps, the urban jungle. “In the second movement, all hell breaks loose,” wrote Alex Ross in The New Yorker. “The Lawrences reprise their notorious yelling act, screaming gibberish in tandem with fast-moving dissonant lines. It’s a spellbinding spectacle, and it is also a hilarious send-up of the emotional infantilism of the ultramodern repertory.”

In complete contrast, all is calm and peaceful in the haunting finale. Here, Schafer says, the players must be in complete unison not only with the notes played, but also with all the physical gestures they go through—the bowing, breathing, body swaying and so on. The music is a long, hypnotic unison melody. After some gentle humming from the players on stage, the first violin moves off into the distance. As he disappears, the music itself seems to float away.

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD
(1897–1957)
Piano Quintet in E, op. 15 (1921)

Success came early to the Vienna-born composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold. At 10, Mahler declared the child prodigy a genius. His early success was crowned by Die Tote Stadt which became one of the most performed operas of the 1920s, reaching more than 80 stages worldwide. His Piano Quintet was written immediately after the opera.

Though neglected for decades after the Nazi clampdown on his music, the quintet is one of a handful of Korngold’s chamber works that were revived in the years leading up to his centenary in 1997. It has continued to hold a place in the repertoire ever since. Its opening theme is echt-Korngold, sumptuously romantic, rich with Strauss-like leaps and thrusting statements, extravagant modulations and passionate sighs. The textures soon become richly layered, with one contrapuntal line laid over another. Few notes on the keyboard are left unplayed. Its piano and string writing pushes the five instruments towards an orchestral sound. The emotional heart of the work is its very fine slow movement. Korngold spins out a never-ending, gently swaying melody that moves seamlessly from one variation to another. It also moves seamlessly from one time signature change to another (there are 54 changes of time signature within 13 pages, by one count). The finale opens with a dramatic fanfare, before launching into an exuberant theme which is worked through with virtuoso skill. A brief cadenza for solo violin leads to a breathless revisiting of the main themes, including the main theme of the opening movement.

—Program notes © 2018 Keith Horner

Biographies

ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

“Modern…dramatic…superb…wickedly attentive…with a hint of rock ‘n roll energy…” are just a few ways critics describe the musical phenomenon that is the St Lawrence String Quartet. The SLSQ is renowned for the intensity of its performances, its breadth of repertoire, and its commitment to concert experiences that are at once intellectually exciting and emotionally alive.

Fiercely committed to collaboration with living composers, the SLSQ’s fruitful partnership with Adams,
Jonathan Berger, Osvaldo Golijov, and many others has yielded some of the finest additions to the quartet literature in recent years. The Quartet is also especially dedicated to the music of Haydn, and are recording his groundbreaking set of six Op. 20 quartets in high-definition video for a free, universal release online in 2017. According to The New Yorker, “…no other North American quartet plays the music of Haydn with more intelligence, expressivity, and force…”

Established in Toronto in 1989, the SLSQ quickly earned acclaim at top international chamber music competitions and was soon playing hundreds of concerts per year worldwide. They established an ongoing residency at Spoleto Festival USA, made prize-winning recordings for EMI of music by Schumann, Tchaikovsky, and Golijov, earning two Grammy nominations and a host of other prizes before being appointed ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University in 1999.

At Stanford, the SLSQ is at the forefront of intellectual life on campus. The SLSQ directs the music department’s chamber music program, and frequently collaborates with other departments including the Schools of Law, Medicine, Business and Education. The Quartet performs regularly at Stanford Live, hosts an annual chamber music seminar, and runs the Emerging String Quartet Program through which they mentor the next generation of young quartets. In the words of Alex Ross of The New Yorker: “The St. Lawrence are remarkable not simply for the quality of their music making, exalted as it is, but for the joy they take in the act of connection.”

Stephen Prutsman has been described as one of the most innovative musicians of his time. Moving easily from classical to jazz to world music styles as a pianist, composer and conductor, Prutsman continues to explore and seek common ground and relationships in the music of all cultures and languages.

From 2004–2007 Stephen was Artistic Partner with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, where he conducted concertos from the keyboard, performed in chamber ensembles, conducted works of living composers, developed and arranged collaborations for their Engine 408 series of contemporary and world music, and wrote several new works for the orchestra. From 2009–2012 he was the Artistic Director of the Cartagena International Festival of Music, South America’s largest festival of its kind, programming and curating concerts with themes ranging from Mozart celebrations, to eclectic evenings of folk and popular music of the Americas, to hybrid programs fusing art and dance music of multiple musical dimensions.

In the early 1990s he was a medal winner at the Tchaikovsky and Queen Elisabeth Piano Competitions, and received the Avery Fisher Career Grant. Since then Stephen has performed the classical concerto repertoire as soloist with many of the world’s leading orchestras and his classical discography includes acclaimed recordings of the Barber and McDowell concerti with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland.

Born in Los Angeles, Stephen first began playing the piano by ear at age three, before moving on to more formal music studies. In his teens and early 20s he was the keyboard player for several art rock groups including Cerberus and Vysion. He was also during those years a solo jazz pianist playing in many southern California clubs and lounges and was the music arranger for a nationally syndicated televangelist program. A former student of Aube Tzerko, Leon Fleisher, and Jack Wilson Stephen studied at the University of California at Los Angeles and the Peabody Conservatory of Music.

As a composer, Stephen’s long collaboration with Grammy Award winning Kronos Quartet has resulted in over 40 arrangements and compositions for them. Other leading artists and ensembles who have performed Stephen’s compositions and arrangements include Leon Fleisher, Dawn Upshaw, the St. Lawrence String Quartet, Yo-Yo Ma, Spoleto USA, and the Silk Road Project. In 2010, his song cycle “Piano Lessons” was premiered by Ms. Upshaw and Emanuel Ax at Carnegie Hall, the Concertgebouw, Walt Disney Hall, and the Barbican Centre. As a pianist or arranger outside of the classical music world he has collaborated with such diverse personalities as Tom Waits, Rokia Traore, Joshua Redman, Jon Anderson of “YES,”Sigur Rós, and Asha Bhosle.