PROGRAM: SUNDAYS WITH THE ST. LAWRENCE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2013 / 2:30 PM / BING CONCERT HALL

ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

ARTISTS
Geoff Nuttall
Violin
Scott St. John
Violin
Lesley Robertson
Viola
Christopher Costanza
Cello

program
Franz Joseph Haydn: String Quartet in D Major, op. 71, no. 2 (1793)
   Adagio – Allegro
   Adagio cantabile
   Menuetto
   Finale

Samuel Carl Adams: String Quartet in Five Movements (2013)
   (West Coast premiere)
   Old Music
   Quiet, Rocking, with Sad Cello Solo
   Summoning Haydn from Sirius
   Minuet and Trio, Sometimes in 5
   Hymn, Vanishing

*INTERMISSION*

Ludwig van Beethoven: String Quartet in A Minor, op. 132 (1824–1825)
   Assai sostenuto – Allegro
   Allegro ma non tanto
   Molto adagio – Andante
   Alla marcia, assai vivace – Allegro appassionato

Sundays with the St. Lawrence is presented in partnership with Music at Stanford and generously supported by Paul and Iris Brest.

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.
FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)
STRING QUARTET IN D MAJOR, OP. 71, NO. 2 (1793)

On January 19, 1794, traveling in a comfortable horse-drawn carriage borrowed from the music-loving Baron van Swieten, Franz Joseph Haydn left Esterháza on a second journey to England. He had his viola with him and had it repaired and restrung while in London. He also had some new symphonies and six new string quartets that were soon to become known as Opus 71 and 74. They were different from anything he had written before.

Haydn was returning to London at the insistence of the violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon. This virtuoso musician who, like Beethoven, was born in Bonn but who now made London his home, had a fine reputation as leader of a string quartet. He introduced Haydn to a new world of public—not private—concerts that included chamber music. He also introduced Haydn to skilled musicians who could speedily come to terms with new music and to sophisticated concert audiences who craved novelty—and were willing to pay handsomely for it. This was all very different from the insular court life that Haydn had known for decades at Esterháza and different, too, from the more formal, semiprivate concerts that were given in the homes of the Viennese aristocrats. The six quartets of Opus 71 and 74 were, in fact, commissioned by an Austro-Hungarian friend and patron, Count von Apponyi, a Freemason who had sponsored Haydn’s admittance to the craft eight or nine years earlier. But Apponyi’s sponsorship is not reflected in the music of the six quartets. Salomon’s virtuoso violin technique comes through in every movement. In the English-speaking world, the quartets tend to be known as the Salomon Quartets; in German-speaking countries, they are known as the Apponyi Quartets.

The D-major quartet, op. 71, no. 2, is characteristically drawn on a broader canvas than the more intimate, intense, and inward-looking Viennese works. It is the most brilliant of the set, and the one that most clearly reflects Salomon’s fine technique as a quartet leader. Typically, it opens with two attention-grabbing forte chords, designed to tell a London audience in the Hanover Square Rooms that it was time to stop chattering and to pay attention to the music. The Allegro is built upon octave leaps in the four instruments. These are the building blocks of the movement. Good humor and technical ingenuity are the chief characteristics of the opening movement. The lyrical first-violin line of the slow movement, an aria for the violin, reflects Salomon’s playing. “He plays quartets with more feeling and imagination, more taste, expression, and variety than we ever heard them played,” a London newspaper wrote at the time. The minuet is again built upon the span of an octave, and an elegant finale brings this superbly crafted quartet to its conclusion.

—© 2013, Keith Horner

SAMUEL CARL ADAMS (B. 1985)
STRING QUARTET IN FIVE MOVEMENTS (2013)

String Quartet in Five Movements was commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA for the St. Lawrence String Quartet. The first performance was given on June 2, 2013, at the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina. I began work on the piece in Brooklyn, New York, in the winter of 2013 and completed the score the following spring.
About two months prior to starting work on this piece, I read a lecture by Italo Calvino on the topic of lightness in poetry. What I took from his words, more than anything, was the point that poetry—or any form of art—need not indulge in the weight of the world. Rather, poetry can refract the weight—without necessarily evading its presence:

“The only hero able to cut off Medusa’s head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals; Perseus, who does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield...Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification.” (Italo Calvino from Six Memos for the Next Millennium)

I found this image striking and meaningful—timely, too, as I had developed an anxiety about writing for this particular medium. So this piece is about lightness and, in certain instances, extroversion. It takes its inspiration from Calvino’s approach to writing (or at least my approximation of it). I reference the work of people who I think achieved this in their own work: people like Francois Couperin, Joseph Haydn, John Cage, and James Blake.

The piece is dedicated with admiration to Geoff Nuttall, Scott St. John, Lesley Robertson, and Christopher Costanza.

—Notes by Samuel Carl Adams

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 132
(1824–1825)

The five string quartets and Great Fugue that Beethoven composed during the last five years of his life mark the pinnacle of his chamber music. The cycle began with a commission to write “one, two, or three new quartets” for Prince Nikolay Golitsyn, a wealthy Russian amateur cellist who was living in Vienna. Still in his twenties, Golitsyn had made string quartet and quintet transcriptions of all Beethoven’s piano sonatas. It had been 12 years since Beethoven last wrote a quartet, and his priority first lay in completing his Ninth Symphony. But then his sketchbooks began to fill with ideas and his work on the commission proceeded with great intensity, with ideas from one work spilling over to the next.

Beethoven originally laid out this A-minor quartet in four movements. Then, in the spring of 1825, he fell seriously ill with a variety of debilitating diseases. Toward the end of May, he began to recover, and the change in his physical well-being had a profound impact on the work. A central slow movement was the immediate result. Beethoven marked it Sacred Song of Thanksgiving to the Deity from a Convalescent. It is one of the most sublime pieces of music ever written—and one of the longest quartet movements, at almost half the length of the quartet itself. Its contemplative stillness is enhanced by the conscious use of an old church mode known as the Lydian mode. Beethoven mentions it in the score, as if to remind us that the old church modes, with their spiritual, often mystical, and tonally ambiguous connotations, were a deep source of inspiration in his late works. In the slow movement of the quartet, the...
successive alternations of adagio and andante bring new expressions of relief from the composer. These are noted in the margin of his score as “Feeling new strength,” “You returned my strength to find me in the evening,” and, in the final section, “With the most intimate feeling.” Because of the generally dark character of much of the quartet, this transcendent slow movement seems to radiate inner release from outward suffering.

Beethoven made this huge slow movement the centerpiece of a vast, arch-like structure. The quartet opens with an Allegro, built around two contrasting themes and presenting a thread of unresolved contradictions. The movement departs from conventional form as does the vast scherzo that follows. Its central pastoral episode, nominally a trio section, begins with a musette-like theme high on the first violin. It continues with a ländler theme that Beethoven wrote down in his sketchbook when he first went to Vienna many years earlier. After the sublime, heavenly slow movement, the mood is abruptly broken by a march, which brings us back to earth with a bump.

As in the Ninth Symphony, an instrumental recitative leads to the finale. Its impassioned, waltz-like theme, which gives way to an unequivocal feeling of joy, was, in fact, originally designed to be the finale of the Ninth Symphony before Beethoven decided on a choral ending for that work. Both works end with a feeling of transcendence and triumph.

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ST. LAWRENCE STRING QUARTET

The St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ) has established itself among the world-class chamber ensembles of its generation. Its mission: bring every piece of music to the audience in vivid color, with pronounced communication and teamwork and great respect to the composer. Since winning both the Banff International String Quartet Competition and Young Concert Artists International Auditions in 1992, the quartet has delighted audiences with its spontaneous, passionate, and dynamic performances. Alex Ross of the New Yorker magazine writes, “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.”

Whether playing Haydn or premiering a new work, the SLSQ has a rare ability to bring audiences to rapt attention. They reveal surprising nuances in familiar repertoire and illuminate the works of some of today’s most celebrated composers, often all in the course of one evening. John Adams has written two critically acclaimed works expressly for the quartet, including String Quartet (2009) and Absolute Jest (2012), which they premiered with the San Francisco Symphony in 2012. In 2011, the SLSQ premiered Qohelet, a work by Osvaldo Golijov, also composed for them.

The SLSQ maintains a busy touring schedule. Some 2013–14 season highlights include visits to Vancouver, Princeton, Portland, Toronto, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Palm Beach, and Washington, D.C. The quartet also will premiere a new work by George Tsontakis in Carmel, California. They will perform Absolute Jest with the Toronto Symphony and on a European tour with the San Francisco Symphony. During the summer season, the SLSQ is proud to continue its long association with Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina.
Since 1998, the St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ) has held the position of ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University. This residency includes working 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 SLSQ are visiting artists-in-residence at Arizona State University.

The foursome’s passion for opening up musical arenas to players and listeners alike is evident in their annual summer chamber music seminar at Stanford and their many forays into the depths of musical meaning with preeminent music educator Robert Kapilow.

 Violist Lesley Robertson is a founding member of the group and hails from Edmonton, Alberta. Cellist Christopher Costanza is from Utica, New York, and joined the quartet in 2003. Violinists Geoff Nuttall and Scott St. John both grew up in London, Ontario; Mr. Nuttall is a founding member, and Mr. St. John joined in 2006. According to concert repertoire, the two alternate the role of first violin. All four members of the quartet live and teach at Stanford.

The St. Lawrence String Quartet appears by arrangement with David Rowe Artists (www.davidroweartists.com).

“A sound that has just about everything one wants from a quartet, most notably precision, warmth and an electricity that conveys the excitement of playing whatever is on their stands at the moment.”

The New York Times

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