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

PROGRAM
Joseph Haydn: String Quartet in D, op. 20, no. 4, Hob. III:34 (1772)
- Allegro di molto
- Un poco adagio e affettuoso
- Menuetto – Allegretto alla zingarese
- Finale – Presto e scherzando

Leoš Janáček: String Quartet No. 1, The Kreutzer Sonata (1923)
- Adagio – Con moto
- Con moto
- Con moto
- Con moto (Adagio)

INTERMISSION

Robert Schumann: String Quartet in A, op. 41, no. 3 (1842)
- Andante espressivo – Allegro molto moderato
- Assai agitato
- Adagio molto
- Finale – Allegro molto vivace

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

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.
JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)
STRING QUARTET IN D, OP. 20, NO. 4, HOB. III:34 (1772)

Joseph Haydn wrote his six Op. 20 quartets in 1772 when he was 40 years old. They contain some of his finest chamber music, a fact recognized by both his contemporaries and the composer himself. With Op. 20, Haydn reached true mastery of the form. This is music designed to move and stir the emotions, rather than merely please and entertain. When issuing a new edition of the quartets toward the end of Haydn’s life, his Viennese publisher Artaria acknowledged that it was with these quartets that “Haydn so decisively found his fame.” The D-major quartet is one of the most admired of the set. Its first two movements have an intensity and urgency that is new to the medium. The brisk opening movement is virtually built upon just one theme. The slow movement is a set of four variations on a quiet, meditative theme in the minor key. The minuet has a Gypsy or Roma flavor that Haydn probably heard firsthand at Eszterház. The palace where he and the Esterházy court spent the long summer months. The mood is picked up in the ebullient finale, which is one of Haydn’s wittiest. “Gloria in Excelsis Deo,” Haydn wrote at the end of the score.

When the Op. 20 collection was printed in Berlin, the publisher put the emblem of a rising sun on the front cover, and this is why these pieces have been known as the Sun Quartets ever since. Mozart admired the collection. Beethoven copied them out to better understand their craft. And at the end of the 19th century, Brahms owned the original manuscripts, which he donated to the Vienna Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, which retains the manuscripts to this day.

LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854–1928)
STRING QUARTET NO. 1, THE KREUTZER SONATA (1923)

Leo Tolstoy’s novella The Kreutzer Sonata provided Czech composer Leoš Janáček with the starting point for the first of his two string quartets. Janáček wrote his quartet in a little more than a week in 1923, adapting music from a piano trio based on the same literary source from over a decade earlier. “The quartet arose out of several ideas taken from this work,” he said. Three years earlier, in his opera Káťa Kabánová, Janáček had explored a similar theme: that of the unhappily married woman who, in seeking happiness, finds an unworthy lover, only to die tragically. With the First Quartet, Janáček was to give this powerful theme its expression in chamber music.

Its tale of passion, jealousy, and chamber music is narrated by Pozdnychev, a jealous and domineering husband who, suspecting that his wife is having a love affair rather than a musical partnership with a violinist, is driven by jealousy to murder her with a dagger. Janáček identifies with the unnamed wife, rather than with underlying themes in Tolstoy’s polémical narrative. “I had in mind a poor woman, tormented, beaten, battered to death,” he wrote to Kamila Stösslová, his confidante and would-be mistress. Composer Josef Suk, who was then second violinist in the Czech Quartet, the group that gave the first performance of the work, was reported as saying, “Janáček meant the work to be a kind of moral protest against men’s despotic attitude to women. Thus, while Tolstoy in The Kreutzer Sonata ascribes to music ‘the most immoral effect’ (music being, according to Tolstoy, one of the main forces for encouraging adultery in our society), Janáček in his Quartet uses music to the exactly opposite effect—as the voice of the conscience of humanity.”

Janáček neither follows the exact sequence of Tolstoy’s novella nor precisely models his characters after those of Tolstoy. Rather, he uses the raw material of the novella, with its powerful emotional content, to infuse his own musical material, juxtaposing snatches of one against snatches of the other. The poignant, pleading opening theme of the quartet clearly characterizes the heroine (and also suggests a Moravian folksong that Janáček admired). This theme recurs like a motto in various guises throughout the quartet. The first movement is dominated by a more assertive theme, which represents the overbearing husband. The scherzo-like second movement includes the rhythm of a polka and introduces the elegant musician Trukhachevski. The third movement contains an allusion to Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata, which was played by the lovers in Tolstoy’s story during a musical soirée. The finale opens with agitated music that represents Pozdnychev’s jealousy. As references to music from earlier movements recur, they are dominated by the poignant, pleading theme of the opening. It is a touching and powerful recollection of the wife as she lies dying.

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
STRING QUARTET IN A, OP. 41, NO. 3 (1842)

A few months after completing this quartet and its two companions, Robert Schumann wrote to a friend, “You may be sure that I have spared no pains to produce something really good; indeed, I sometimes think, my best.” He wrote all three quartets during a highly focused seven-week period in the summer of 1842. We now know that his intense bursts of creativity juxtaposed with troubling periods of melancholy were related to a lifelong mental illness that eventually led to an early death. His interest in the string quartet followed a flood of piano music in 1839. Then there followed his “year of song” and, significantly, his long-delayed marriage to pianist Clara Wieck. The following year saw an outpouring of orchestral music. Then, in June and July of 1842, he turned to the string quartet.
Schumann saw the medium of the string quartet as a “by turns beautiful and even abstrusely woven conversation between four people.” In his critical writings, he gave praise when he saw an awareness of tradition in a composer’s music, rejecting orchestral-like writing on the one hand and intrusions from the opera house on the other. The Third Quartet, written between July 8 and 22, 1842, is the most unified yet relaxed of the three quartets. Many view it as the finest. Like Beethoven’s Harp Quartet, it opens with a melancholy, pleading sigh that soon evolves into the sunnier, lyrical opening theme of the first movement. Both the interval of a falling fifth and the opening chords—echoing the same chord found in Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 18, op. 31, no. 3—become the building blocks of the entire movement. It ends, again, with a sigh.

The ingenious second movement begins much like a scherzo by Mendelssohn (to whom the three quartets are dedicated). However, it soon becomes clear that it is, in fact, a set of variations, four in all, and three of the variations actually precede the theme itself. The movement concludes with a final variation and again uses the same musical building blocks as the opening movement. The musical unity continues in the two remaining movements. The beautiful, yearning slow movement takes the interval of a fifth and inverts it to produce one of the most eloquent of all Schumann’s slow movements. The Finale, on the other hand, returns right away to further explore the opening chord. Its originality of development, combining elements of rondo, scherzo, and trio in an altogether unique manner, is a fitting conclusion to one of the finest works in the repertoire.

In recent seasons, the SLSQ has been highlighting first violinist Geoff Nottall’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. Nottall, 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 St. Lawrence String Quartet and composer John Adams is a marriage made in chamber music heaven.” In his critical writings, he gave praise when he saw an awareness of tradition in a composer’s music, rejecting orchestral-like writing on the one hand and intrusions from the opera house on the other. The Third Quartet, written between July 8 and 22, 1842, is the most unified yet relaxed of the three quartets. Many view it as the finest. Like Beethoven’s Harp Quartet, it opens with a melancholy, pleading sigh that soon evolves into the sunnier, lyrical opening theme of the first movement. Both the interval of a falling fifth and the opening chords—echoing the same chord found in Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 18, op. 31, no. 3—become the building blocks of the entire movement. It ends, again, with a sigh.

The St. Lawrence String Quartet
Established in 1989, the St. Lawrence String Quartet (SLSQ) 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.

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.

Lesley Robertson and Geoff Nottall 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.