

ARTPOWER!

MULTI-ARTS SEASON 2013-2014

DANISH STRING QUARTET

Friday, January 31, 2014 / 8pm

Department of Music's

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

SPONSOR

Sam B. Ersan

ARTISTS

Frederik Øland, Violin

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, Viola

Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, Cello

PROGRAM

HANS ABRAHAMSEN :

String Quartet No. 1, "10 Preludes for String Quartet"

CLAUDE DEBUSSY:

String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10

Animé et très décidé

Assez vif et bien rythmé

Andantino, doucement expressif

Très modéré; très mouvementé

INTERMISSION

FELIX MENDELSSOHN- BARTHOLDY

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13

Adagio; Allegro vivace

Adagio non lento

Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto

Presto



PROGRAM NOTES

HANS ABRAHAMSEN

(b. 1952)

String Quartet No. 1,

"Ten Preludes for String Quartet"

Composed in 1973.

Hans Abrahamsen has been a prominent figure in Danish music since the Kontra Quartet of Copenhagen premiered his String Quartet No. 1, "Ten Preludes," in 1973; he was 21. Abrahamsen, born in Copenhagen in 1952, demonstrated exceptional musical gifts in his early teens and had already begun composing by the time he entered the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen in 1969 to study French horn and composition, in which his principal teacher was Niels Viggo Bentzon. He continued his composition studies at the Royal Academy of Music in Århus with Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, and in 1975 went back to Copenhagen for advanced training in music history and music theory; he also studied composition privately with Per Nørgård and György Ligeti. Since 1982, Abrahamsen has taught at the Academy of Music in Copenhagen; he has also served as Artistic Director of the Esbjerg Ensemble. Among his honors are the Carl Nielsen Prize (1989) and Wilhelm Hansen Prize (1998). In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Danish critic, teacher, and music administrator Anders Beyer wrote, "Abrahamsen's music possesses a particular epic quality. He likes to tell stories, to create musical images for the listener. But these are



not in the shape of clear forms and figures: his works never reveal their innermost secrets, and the composer rarely presents the listener with unambiguous solutions."

Abrahamsen wrote of his String Quartet No. 1, subtitled "Ten Preludes," "Even with all their brevity, these ten 'short-stories' for string quartet contain almost all that can be desired of musical expression within the relatively short period of 20 minutes. Violence expressed as joy, simplicity as necessity, contrasts as form. The eruptive side of the music is not sharply segregated from the simple, harmoniously melodious side. Each of the 'short stories' points forward to the next and at the same time back to its predecessor and thus makes for a unified overall structure. That the last of the preludes is a straight Baroque pastiche could be interpreted as an almost Holbergian moral in which things are sorted out and loose ends tied up. As in fairy tales one could say, '...there, this was a true story.'"

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

(1862-1918)

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 10

Composed in 1893.

Early in 1893, Debussy met the famed Belgian violinist Eugene Ysaÿe. Debussy was at this time almost unknown (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was still a year in the future), but he and Ysaÿe instantly became friends—though Ysaÿe was only four years older than Debussy, he treated the diminutive Frenchman like "his little brother." That summer, Debussy composed a

string quartet for Ysaÿe's quartet, which gave the first performance in Paris on December 29, 1893. Debussy was already notorious with his teachers for his refusal to follow musical custom, and so it comes as a surprise to find him choosing to write in this most demanding of classical forms. Early audiences were baffled. Reviewers used words like "fantastic" and "oriental," and Debussy's friend Ernest Chausson confessed mystification. Debussy must have felt the sting of these reactions, for he promised Chausson, "Well, I'll write another for you . . . and I'll try to bring more dignity to the form."

But Debussy did not write another string quartet, and his Quartet in G Minor has become one of the cornerstones of the quartet literature. The entire quartet grows directly out of its first theme, presented at the very opening, and this sharply rhythmic figure reappears in various shapes in all four movements, taking on a different character, a different color and a different harmony on each reappearance. What struck early audiences as "fantastic" now seems an utterly original conception of what a string quartet might be. Here is a combination of energy, drama, thematic imagination and attention to color never heard before in a string quartet. Debussy may have felt pushed to apologize for a lack of "dignity" in this music, but we value it today just for that failure.

Those who think of Debussy as the composer of misty impressionism are in for a shock with his quartet, for it has the most slashing, powerful opening Debussy ever wrote: his marking for the beginning is "Animated and very resolute." This first theme, with its characteristic triplet spring, is the backbone of the entire quartet: the singing second theme grows directly out of this opening (though the third introduces new material). The development is marked by powerful accents, long crescendos and shimmering colors as this movement drives to an unrelenting close in G Minor.

The Scherzo may well be the quartet's most impressive movement. Against powerful pizzicato chords, Debussy sets the viola's bowed

theme, a transformation of the quartet's opening figure; soon this is leaping between all four voices. The recapitulation of this movement, in 15/8 and played entirely pizzicato, bristles with rhythmic energy, and the music then fades away to a beautifully understated close. Debussy marks the third movement "Gently expressive," and this quiet music is so effective that it is sometimes used as an encore piece. It is in ABA form: the opening section is muted, while the more animated middle is played without mutes—the quartet's opening theme reappears subtly in this middle section. Debussy marks the ending, again played with mutes, "As quiet as possible."

The finale begins slowly but gradually accelerates to the main tempo, "Very lively and with passion." As this music proceeds, the quartet's opening theme begins to appear in a variety of forms: first in a misty, distant statement marked "soft and expressive," then gradually louder and louder until it returns in all its fiery energy, stamped out in double-stops by the entire quartet. A propulsive coda drives to the close, where the first violin flashes upward across three octaves to strike the powerful G Major chord that concludes this most undignified—and most wonderful—piece of music.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY

(1809–1847)

String Quartet in A minor, Op. 13,

"Ist Es Wahr?"

Composed in 1827.

Felix Mendelssohn, in 1827, must have been the most musically sophisticated eighteen year-old in Europe. Upon the foundation of his fine general education had been placed disciplined training in theory and composition from Carl Friedrich Zelter (a distinguished pedagogue who was then the director of the Berlin Singakademie), tutelage in violin with Carl Wilhelm Henning (a respected member of the Berlin Opera orchestra) and Eduard Rietz (a close friend who succeeded Mendelssohn as director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts upon the composer's death in 1847), and in piano with his mother (a student of the noted German

theorist Johann Philipp Kirnberger, himself a pupil of Johann Sebastian Bach) and Marie Bigot (an esteemed Alsatian virtuoso and friend of Haydn and Beethoven). Mendelssohn's first dated composition, a cantata, was completed on January 3, 1820, three weeks before his eleventh birthday, though this piece was almost certainly preceded by others whose exact dates are not recorded. Two years later began the twice-monthly Sunday family concerts at the Mendelssohns' Berlin mansion, for which Felix selected the programs, led the rehearsals, appeared as piano and violin soloist and chamber musician, and even conducted, though as a young teenager he was still too short to be seen by the players in the back rows unless he stood on a stool. By 1825, he had written over 80 works for these concerts, including operas and operettas, string quartets and other chamber pieces, concertos, motets, and a series of 13 symphonies for strings.

The Quartet in A minor that Mendelssohn completed on October 26, 1827, was the product of this entire congeries of influences—Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, plus, of course, his own genius—which were further enflamed by a petite affaire de le cœur. The previous spring, shortly before matriculating at Berlin University, Mendelssohn had indulged in a short holiday at Sakrow, the Magnus family estate near Potsdam, and there he fell in love, at least a little. The circumstances, even the maiden's name, are uncertain (one Betty Pistor, a family friend and a member of a choir for which Mendelssohn was then piano accompanist, has been advanced as a possibility), but he was sufficiently moved by the experience to set to music a poem of his friend Johann Gustav Droyson that began, "Is it true [Ist es wahr?] that you are always waiting for me in the arboreal walk?" The piece, published two years later under the title Frage ("Question") as the first number of his Op. 9 set of songs, was woven as thematic material into the new A minor Quartet. The score was published in 1829 as Mendelssohn's Op. 13.

"In this work, the mature composer stands revealed," wrote Homer Ulrich of Mendelssohn's A minor Quartet in his comprehensive survey of

the chamber repertory. "All the melodic charm, all the perfection of detail, all the deftness of touch we associate with the later works are present in this Quartet from his eighteenth year." This Quartet is also the most Beethovenian of Mendelssohn's works, embracing bold contrasts, adventurous harmonies, complex counterpoint, cyclical procedures, multi-compartmented movements, and a pervasive impassioned expression that lend this music an urgency which Mendelssohn seldom recaptured. At a performance of the Quartet at a Paris salon, a music loving priest nudged Mendelssohn during the finale, and whispered, "He does that in one of his symphonies." "Who?" asked the composer. "Why, Beethoven, the author of this Quartet," came the reply. "That was bittersweet," Mendelssohn allowed.

The Quartet opens with a slow introduction whose A major tonality serves as an emotional foil for the tempestuous main body of the movement. Two arching phrases—the second soaring high in the first violin's compass—preface the quotation of the searching motto phrase from *Ist Es Wahr?*, recognizable by its long–short long rhythm. The music's tempo and energy are quickened by scurrying filigree before the viola initiates the principal theme, based on the motto rhythm. The cello posits a lyrical melody as the complementary subject. The scurrying phrases return to mark the onset of the development section, which is remarkable for the intensity of its counterpoint and its nearly febrile mood. The recapitulation serves both to return and to enhance the earlier themes before the movement closes with an explosive coda that stops without resolving the music's strong tensions. The deeply felt Adagio offers another paraphrase of the motto theme at beginning and end as the frame for the somber, densely packed fugal episode that occupies the middle of the movement. The third movement, titled *Intermezzo*, uses a charmingly folkish tune, daintily scored, in its outer sections to surround an ethereal passage of musical featherstitching at the center. Both ideas are deftly combined in the coda. A dramatic cadenza-recitative for the

violin over tremolo harmonies, reminiscent of the fourth movement of Beethoven's A minor Quartet, Op. 132, launches the finale. A clutch of highly charged motives is presented and worked out with great intensity as the music unfolds. The work closes not with a wail of tragedy or with a sunburst of redemption, but with a recall of the Quartet's most introspective moments—first the theme of the Adagio, and then the introduction from the opening movement, bringing with it a final reflection upon the music and thought, *Ist Es Wahr?*



DANISH STRING QUARTET

Embodying the quintessential elements of a chamber music ensemble, the Danish String Quartet has established a reputation for possessing an integrated sound, impeccable intonation and judicious balance. With its technical and interpretive talents matched by an infectious joy for music-making, the quartet is in demand worldwide by concert and festival presenters alike. Since making its debut in 2002 at the Copenhagen Festival, the group of musical friends has demonstrated a passion for Scandinavian composers, who they frequently incorporate into adventurous contemporary programs, while also proving skilled and profound performers of the classical masters. Last season, the *New York Times* selected their concert as a highlight of the year: "One of the most powerful renditions of Beethoven's Opus 132 String Quartet that I've heard live or on a recording." This scope of talent has secured them a three-year appointment in the coveted Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's CMS Two Program beginning in the 2013-14 season and they have also been named as a BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artist for 2013-15.

Since winning the Danish Radio P2 Chamber Music Competition in 2004, the quartet has been in great demand throughout Denmark and in October 2013 it presented the seventh annual DSQ-Musifest, a three-day festival held in Copenhagen that brings together musical friends the quartet has met on its travels. Outside of its homeland the quartet will perform in the UK, Spain, Germany, Northern Ireland, Australia, Norway and Poland during the 2013-14 season. In 2009 the Danish String Quartet won First Prize in the 11th London International String Quartet Competition, as well as four additional prizes from the same jury. This competition is now called the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition and the Danish String Quartet has performed at the famed hall on several occasions. It will return to Wigmore Hall in April 2014 to perform a program of Beethoven and Haydn.

The Danish String Quartet was awarded First Prize in the Vagn Holmboe String Quartet Competition and the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in Holland and the Audience Prize in the Trondheim International String Quartet Competition in 2005. The Danish String Quartet was awarded the 2010 NORDMETALL-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany and, in 2011, received the prestigious Carl Nielsen Prize.

In 2006, the Danish String Quartet was Danish Radio's Artist-in-Residence, giving them the opportunity to record all of Carl Nielsen's string quartets in the Danish Radio Concert Hall, subsequently released to critical acclaim on the Dacapo label in 2007 and 2008. The *New York Times* review said "These Danish players have excelled in performances of works by Brahms, Mozart and Bartok in New York in recent years. But they play Nielsen's quartets as if they owned them." In 2012 the Danish String Quartet released an equally-acclaimed recording of Haydn and Brahms quartets on the German AVI-music label. Said Anthony Tommasini of the *New York Times*: "What makes the performance special is the maturity and calm of the playing, even during virtuosic passages that whisk

by. This is music making of wonderful ease and naturalness..." It recently recorded works by Brahms and Fuchs with award-winning clarinetist Sebastian Manz at the Bayerische Rundfunk in Munich to be released by AVI-music in early 2014. The quartet's love of Scandinavian music has been captured in a recording of folk music that was released on its own label in September 2013.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played both football and music together, eventually making the transition into a serious string quartet in their teens and studying at Copenhagen's Royal Academy of Music. In 2008 the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin. The Danish String Quartet was primarily taught and mentored by Professor Tim Frederiksen and has participated in master classes with the Tokyo and Emerson String Quartets, Alasdair Tait, Paul Katz, Hugh Maguire, Levon Chilingirian and Gábor Takács-Nagy.
www.danishquartet.com

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3. To add to the artistic and cultural life of the La Jolla and San Diego communities.



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