CMS Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, MARCH 3, 2024, AT 5:00 ▸ 4,410TH CONCERT

Alice Tully Hall, Starr Theater, Adrienne Arsht Stage
Home of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

SCHUMANN QUARTET
ERIK SCHUMANN, violin
KEN SCHUMANN, violin
VEIT HERTENSTEIN, viola
MARK SCHUMANN, cello

Winter Festival: Quartet Panorama

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

Quartet in F minor for Strings, Op. 95, "Serioso" (1810–11)
▸ Allegro con brio
▸ Allegretto ma non troppo
▸ Allegro assai vivace, ma serioso
▸ Larghetto espressivo—Allegretto agitato
E. SCHUMANN, K. SCHUMANN, HERTENSTEIN, M. SCHUMANN

ALBAN BERG
(1885–1935)

Quartet for Strings, Op. 3 (1910)
▸ Langsam
▸ Mässige viertel
E. SCHUMANN, K. SCHUMANN, HERTENSTEIN, M. SCHUMANN

INTERMISSION

BEDŘICH SMETANA
(1824–1884)

Quartet No. 1 in E minor for Strings, "From My Life" (1876)
▸ Allegro vivo appassionata
▸ Allegro moderato alla polka
▸ Largo sostenuto
▸ Vivace
E. SCHUMANN, K. SCHUMANN, HERTENSTEIN, M. SCHUMANN

The **Jerome L. Greene Foundation** is the 2023–2024 CMS Season Sponsor.

All CMS digital programming is supported by the **Hauser Fund for Media and Technology**.

ABOUT TONIGHT'S PROGRAM

Dear Listener,

It is a great pleasure to welcome back—after a seemingly interminable Covid hiatus—the esteemed Schumann Quartet from Germany.

The last time we heard them live, they offered us a program of similar excitement and variety, performing a classic work by Mozart, the incomparable (and difficult!) *Lyric Suite* by Alban Berg, and Grieg's heartfelt Op. 27 Quartet, a tribute to his homeland. However, if it seems to anyone that the Schumann Quartet has not been all that absent, there's a good reason: During CMS's 2020–21 season, which was entirely digital, the Schumann Quartet performed thirteen different works for us, drawn from their extensive CMS performances of prior seasons. For that contribution to chamber music during a most difficult time, we can all be immensely grateful and welcome them back warmly.

The Schumann's program today travels three new routes towards the top of the musical Mount Everest (as we characterized the string quartet repertoire in our last letter). They begin with two incredibly similar works composed in two completely different eras in Vienna, by Beethoven and Berg. It so happens that Beethoven's Op. 95 Quartet, titled by the composer "quartetto serioso," breathes the same frenetic intensity of Berg's youthful quartet, composed exactly one hundred years later. Both works are compact and dense, the Berg compressed into a single movement. There is hardly room to breathe during either work!

But as something of a relief, after intermission we'll hear the beautiful String Quartet No. 1 by Smetana, an autobiographical work that takes us through stages of his life from dawn to dusk. A more poignant work does not exist in our repertoire, and it provides the perfect conclusion to this brilliantly conceived program by the Schumanns.

Enjoy the concert,

David Finckel Wu Han
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Nicky Swett

Quartet in F minor for Strings, Op. 95, "Serioso"

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

- Baptized December 17, 1770, in Bonn (likely born December 16)
- Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Composed in 1810–11

- First CMS performance on January 30, 1972, by the Guarneri String Quartet (violinists Arnold Steinhardt and John Dalley, violist Michael Tree, and cellist David Soyer)
- Duration: 21 minutes

In 1810, Ludwig van Beethoven began his eleventh string quartet, a relatively short work in the key of F minor. Though it was rare for him to put descriptive subtitles on instrumental works, for this one he scrawled "quartetto serioso" at the top of the manuscript. As if to emphasize the gravity of this music, he told his friend George Smart in 1816 that the quartet was "written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public." At this point, though, a public premiere had already taken place, and the work was being offered for publication, which meant that, like it or not, performers and listeners outside of that small circle would be grappling with the piece.

We can identify a variety of reasons Beethoven might have had for thinking this quartet would have been challenging for audiences of the time. The first movement is a jarringly efficient trip through sonata form. He presents the expected contrasts between energetic and lyrical themes, but barely allows for a moment to take in each melodic idea before developing it slightly and moving on. The slow movement encloses brilliant, academically rigorous fugal passages, where the range of the winding line is gradually expanded to encompass numerous aspects of the musical structure. The scherzo, like the opening *Allegro con brio*, is full of compact, explosive gestures marked by empty space.

The finale, with its pathos-ridden *Larghetto espressivo* introduction and desperate, swaying rondo theme, seems made from the same serious stuff. But in the final minute, Beethoven switches tactics completely and leaps into a sparkling, major-key coda full of ecstatic, ascending scales. It is emphatically not the herculean minor-to-major trajectory that we find in many Romantic symphonies, starting with Beethoven's own Fifth. Rather, it's as if he has casually dropped the closing number of a comic opera into a funeral.

Musicians have long debated what to make of the title "serioso," considering this light conclusion. Some, like the composer Vincent D'Indy, have expressed skepticism of this abrupt coda, questioning whether it is suited to the piece as a whole. Contemporary theorists like Mark Evan Bonds and Janet Bourne instead explain it as a distilled example of musical irony. There is such a strong conflict between the stated principle of seriousness and the campy delight of the closing idea that we as listeners must momentarily take a step back to make sense of the contrast.

The operatic playfulness of the ending is not completely unprepared. At four points in the opening movement,

Beethoven halts burning, minor-key madness to have the full group play ascending major scales in unison. Each time, he lets the gesture hang in the air, marking it in our ears, encouraging us to save that strange sense of departure for later. It is, as is the case with many moves in Beethoven's quartets, prescient of elements of style that would achieve ubiquity in the 20th century. As if foretelling the changeable meters and historical formulas juxtaposed in works of Igor Stravinsky, or indeed the genre-mixing methods of a present-day DJ, Beethoven forces the ear to quickly compare musical ideas from different worlds of sound—a serious but also potentially fun undertaking. ◆

Quartet for Strings, Op. 3

ALBAN BERG
- Born February 9, 1885, in Vienna
- Died December 24, 1935, in Vienna

Composed in 1910

- First CMS performance on April 29, 1977, by the LaSalle String Quartet (violinists Walter Levin and Henry Meyer, violist Peter Kamnitzer, and cellist Lee Fiser)
- Duration: 20 minutes

Alban Berg's Op. 3 String Quartet finishes with one of the most striking cadences of the early 20th century. Tension builds over a number of measures: first the cello wavers on a low tritone, then every other instrument enters and emphasizes a note that pulls strongly toward a tonal resolution. At last, the four instruments launch upward to a high, accented D-minor chord, the long-desired harmonic goal, only to thud back down on a final crunch of notes. This last stack of pitches occupies an extremely narrow range, a density that represents a decisive negation of the open spacing of tonal voice leading.

Berg wrote this piece in the middle of 1910, toward the end of his time studying composition with Arnold Schoenberg. Like Schoenberg, he was interested in extending the limits of Western harmony, and playing against the drive to resolve tense, suspenseful chords with more consonant, open sonorities. In works like the 1906 First Chamber Symphony and the finale of the 1908 F-sharp minor String Quartet, Schoenberg included stretches of what would later be called "free atonality," passages in which it is difficult for the ear to identify even a momentary tonic, or tonal home base. Without such a reference point for stability, it becomes complex to ascribe tension or suspense to any given stretch of music. But in Schoenberg's early experiments in atonality, he always ended the complete work in question on a clear cadence, at last resolving to a major triad and allowing whatever confusion he evokes elsewhere to dissipate. Berg, in his 1909 Piano Sonata, Op. 1, engages in such atonal adventures, but he likewise concluded his first published work on a haunting, hard-won B-minor chord.

The philosopher Theodore Adorno, one of Berg's students, recalled that his teacher was frustrated that early attempts to publish the Op. 1 Sonata were rejected. It was with an air of rebuke and "defiance" that he put the pen to page in his String Quartet. His avoidance of a concluding resolution or apotheosis in favor of a resounding anti-cadence is one of the many ways that Berg breaks with the expectations

of the genre of the string quartet in this piece, and indeed beyond anything Schoenberg himself had yet accomplished.

At the start of the first movement, despite the gestural edginess of the main ideas, there is a burning Romanticism. After the first truly successful performance of the piece, in August 1923, Berg "wallowed in the euphony and the solemn sweetness and fantasy of this music. . . . The so-called wildest and boldest passages were, in the classical sense, absolute melodiousness." Harmonic progressions don't straightforwardly dictate where we feel a sense of release, but there are still lyrical phrases marked by cadences and longer thematic sections denoted by changes in energy and motif. There is a kind of sonata form in play in the background as well: an exposition of carefully constructed contrasts, a passage of developmental re-combination, a near-verbatim repetition of the music that starts the movement off. Berg ties the diverse textures together through a web of counterpoint. A melody almost never belongs to a single voice, but cascades across the four instruments, sometimes popping out and sometimes buried by a mass of competing musical ideas.

The second movement contains far more motoric music than the first, with several sections of insistent, infectious rhythm. One of the most striking technical features of this second part of the piece is Berg's use of *bariolage*, a textural strategy dating back to the Baroque era in which a string player alternates between a stopped note and an open string, creating a hollow, shimmering, harmonic-filled effect. The bariolage in the first violin at the very end of the piece adds brilliance to the tense sonority that leads to the final cadence. The clash of open strings with dense chromaticism becomes a powerful reminder of the reversal at the heart of Berg's, and Schoenberg's, project: they prompt us to hear how open, tonal intervals can, in the right context, be more dissonant than a crunchy, closing cluster. ◆

Quartet No. 1 in E minor for Strings, "From My Life"

BEDŘICH SMETANA

- Born March 2, 1824, in Leitomischl, Bohemia (now Litomyšl, Czech Republic)
- Died May 12, 1884, in Prague

Composed in 1876

- First CMS performance on February 11, 1972, by violinists Hiroko Yajima and Charles Treger, violist Walter Trampler, and cellist Leslie Parnas
- Duration: 27 minutes

Hearing loss is a frightening prospect for musicians. Today, professional orchestras install shields around the percussion and brass to protect the ears of those who are daily exposed to the glorious but dangerously loud sounds produced by those instruments. Many players' unions offer hearing tests and support the purchase and professional integration of hearing aids. And researchers and activists now explore ways in which the vibrations and social interactions of music can and should include people with many different levels of hearing ability.

In the 19th century, there were few resources for players and composers facing deafness. Ludwig van Beethoven, in a letter to his brothers in 1802, admitted that he considered suicide when faced with the prospect of a life without being able to hear music, though he overcame his despondency and wrote most of his greatest works in the following decades. And Bedřich Smetana composed a musical reflection on the issue, weaving the reality of hearing loss into his autobiographical 1876 String Quartet in E minor, "From My Life."

In correspondence with his friends, Smetana outlined the story that he associated with each of the quartet's four movements. In the second, for example, Smetana writes a memoir-like polka that recalls a youth in various social spheres. The rustic feel of the opening section, and the rambunctious trumpet call of the viola, nostalgically evoke the jolly folk dances of his earlier days. A statelier central passage was tied to "memories of the aristocratic circles in which I lived for many years." The final movement is a celebration of the triumph of a nationalist style of Czech composition. He helped to establish for composers to come (like Antonín Dvořák, Josef Suk, and Leoš Janáček) a national voice thoroughly grounded in Czech folk music. In the quartet's finale, we hear an unrestrained outpouring of joy and pride both for the nation and for an effective way of portraying that nation musically.

The other movements contain far more darkness. The third is an image of the composer's first wife when they were first in love. In the opening cello solo, we hear a man plunging back into the depths of memory to retrieve something beautiful, but whose beauty ultimately causes pain and sadness. The melody on which Smetana bases the rest of the movement is initially simple, innocent, but each time it recurs it soon morphs into something with a screaming, almost expressionist level of emotive chromaticism.

It is with the main motive of the first movement that Smetana expresses what he saw as the irony and cruelty of his fate. A long, held note, followed by a dramatic, snappy descent of a fifth, starts the opening viola solo. The sustained pitch has its origins in the ringing that Smetana got in his ears in 1874, the first sign of the hearing loss to come. The snappy descent and its many variations are his musical response to that fate. Sometimes the long note is quickly cut off, as if he is resisting its meaning; at other points, as in the second theme of the first movement, the long note is extended by more hopeful harmonies.

The motive returns at the end of the work, after the ebullient celebration of a nationalist music has built to an exhausted climax. There are two measures of rest, then tense tremolos in the lower strings. The first violin plays a high E harmonic, a literal ringing in the ears, followed by the restatement of the first movement's theme: "warning of my cruel fate . . . that has forever taken away the happiness of hearing and deriving pleasure from the beauties of our art." Smetana pulls the tune out to a subdued conclusion, in which the viola's wavering notes allude to the joy of the finale while the other instruments sigh along. They are resigned, but not despondent—as Smetana puts it, the music is ultimately endowed "with a very small hope for a better future." ◆

Cellist, writer, and music researcher Nicky Swett is a PhD candidate and Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

HARALD HOFMANN

SCHUMANN QUARTET

▸ The Schumann Quartet has reached a stage where anything is possible, because it has dispensed with certainties. This also has consequences for audiences, which from one concert to the next have to be prepared for all eventualities: "A work really develops only in a live performance," the quartet says. "That is 'the real thing', because we ourselves never know what will happen. On the stage, all imitation disappears, and you automatically become honest with yourself. Then you can create a bond with the audience — communicate with it in music." This live situation will gain an added energy in the near future: Sharon Kam, Kit Armstrong, Anna Lucia Richter, Sabine Meyer, Katharina Konradi, and Alexey Stadler are among the quartet's current partners.

Special highlights in the 2023–24 season include the opening concert for the new hall at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, the Dvořák Prague International Music Festival, a concert in Linz in honor of the great patron Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge, among other events. In January 2024, they performed two concerts of works by Aribert Reimann in Madrid on the royal Stradivari instruments and embarked again on a US tour that concludes with a performance at the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. They will also perform at the Philharmonie in Berlin and Essen with Kit Armstrong, a Mozart project in Luxembourg and Cologne, and at the Wiener Konzerthaus and the SWR Festival in Schwetzingen.

Its album *Intermezzo* (2018 | Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Schumann, and Reimann with Anna-Lucia Richter) has been hailed enthusiastically both at home and abroad and received the Opus Klassik Award in the quintet category. In 2020 the quartet expanded its discography with *Fragment* and its examination of one of the masters of the string quartet: Franz Schubert. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the radio, the quartet dedicated itself to a very special project: an album of pieces around and from 1923. Together with the Bavarian Radio, they will record works by Alban Berg, Leoš Janáček, Ernst Krenek, and Aaron Copland.

The three brothers Mark, Erik, and Ken Schumann have been playing together since their earliest childhood; meanwhile, violist Veit Hertenstein completes the quartet. The four musicians enjoy the way they communicate without words. Although the individual personalities clearly manifest themselves, a common space arises in every musical work in a process of spiritual metamorphosis. The quartet's openness and curiosity may be partly the result of the formative influence exerted on it by teachers such as Eberhard Feltz, the Alban Berg Quartet, or partners such as Menahem Pressler.

Erik Schumann plays on a violin by Joseph Guarneri filius Andrea from 1690, kindly made available to him by the Guadagnini Foundation Stuttgart. Ken Schumann plays an old Italian violin from the mid-18th century, kindly made available to him privately. Veit Hertenstein plays a viola made by the Amati brothers in 1616. Mark Schumann plays a cello by Giovanni & Francesco Grancino from 1680, generously loaned to him by MERITO Sit Vienna.

ABOUT THE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS) was founded in 1969 under the leadership and patronage of Alice Tully and the artistic direction of Charles Wadsworth, beginning a new era for chamber music in the United States. Through its many performance, education, and digital activities, CMS brings the experience of great chamber music to more people than any other organization of its kind. The performing artists constitute a multi-generational and international roster of the world's finest chamber musicians, enabling CMS to present chamber music of every instrumentation, style, and historical period. The Bowers Program, our competitive three-season residency, is dedicated to developing the chamber music leaders of the future and integrates this selection of extraordinary early-career musicians into every facet of CMS activities. CMS reaches a growing global audience through a range of free digital media, including livestreams, an online archive of more than 1,300 video recordings, and broadcasts that are distributed to millions of listeners around the world.

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Updated on February 22, 2024

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