



Saturday, February 27, 2021

Middlebury Performing Arts Series

presents

DANISH STRING QUARTET

Frederik Øland, Violin · Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, Viola · Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, Cello

Fuga a 3 soggetti; Contrapunctus XIV

Johann Sebastian Bach

from *The Art of Fugue*, BWV 1080

String Quartet (1905)

Anton Webern

Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit, BWV 668

J. S. Bach

Folk Music from Nordic Countries Arr. Danish String Quartet

Regin Smiður (Farose traditional)

Tjønneblomen (Norwegian traditional)

Kisti du kom (Swedish traditional)

Æ Rømeser (Danish traditional)

Lovely Joan (English traditional; arrangement world premiere)

Halling (Fredrik Sjölin)

The Danish String Quartet's broadcast will be available through Saturday, March 6 on our [Digital Stages page](#).

Program Notes

Fuga a 3 soggetti; Contrapunctus XIV from *The Art of Fugue*, BWV 1080 (1750)

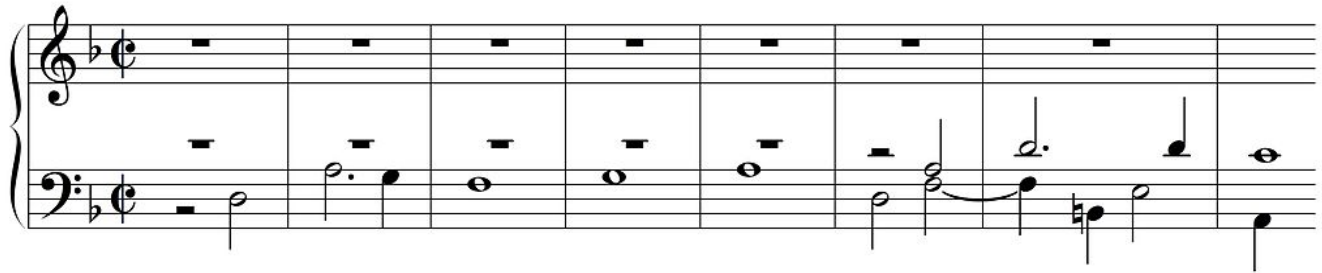
Johann Sebastian Bach

Note by Mark Steinberg, Brentano Quartet, with additions courtesy of Hyperion Records Ltd, London

With *The Art of Fugue*, a veritable Bible of fugal techniques and expression, Bach produced a monumental edifice. (The idea of fugue, for the uninitiated, is that of a musical form which deals with a number of voices all discoursing on shared thematic material, a “subject,” in much the same way debates focus on a subject.) A compilation of fugues based on a single subject (and its variations), *The Art of Fugue* seems to be an exhaustive study of the possibilities of the form, a composer testing his mettle, expanding his horizons. It has long been debated whether the work is in fact a study, theoretical or conceptual, never meant to be performed. Were it meant to be performed there is much speculation on what instrumentation was intended; is it a keyboard work, a work for a

consort of like instruments, for a broken consort, a vocal group? The piece is written in “open score” —on four staves, one per part, with no other indications. There is much room for discussion, for scholarly musings and musicological excavation. What is clear to us is that this is a golden treasure trove of riveting musical rhetoric, elevated, intricately woven round-table discussions which make for an engaging concert experience. It is music for which we have a deep love and which we feel we can bring to life effectively through the medium of the string quartet.

Such a mammoth achievement from the great composer’s last days comes to us only incomplete, as the final fugue (Contrapunctus XVIII) trails off unended, thus inviting romantic speculation. There is the most likely apocryphal story of Bach dying as he dictated the final fugue, having just incorporated his own name as a musical cipher into the fabric of the piece (B = B-flat and H = B natural in German nomenclature). In this way he set his personal seal on the work as a whole.



The first deliberate, ricercare-like theme reads the same whether backwards or forwards. It is heard in stretto and in inversion. The second theme, principally in quavers, eventually combines with the first. The third (final) theme turns to the B–A–C–H motif, presented in minims. After a brief passage of counterpoint the print ends while the autograph continues for another seven bars.

String Quartet (1905)

Anton Webern

Note courtesy of Carl Fischer Music, LLC

The manuscript of Anton von Webern's String Quartet (1905) came to light only in 1961, when it was found among a number of compositions from Webern's earlier creative period, all of which had

previously remained unknown. The year 1905 was a productive one for Webern. While receiving academic training at the University of Vienna, he had sought the private tutelage of Arnold Schoenberg, the mentor and friend with whom he was soon to forge ahead on the still uncharted course towards a new idiom of musical expression. At the end of their first year of association, immediately after composing *Langsamer Satz* for string quartet in June of 1905, Webern set to work on a more expansive and ambitious essay in the same genre. A formal plan, dated July 13, prefaces the earliest sketches to the string quartet. It reveals that the composer derived his inspiration from a painting, the triptych *Werden–Sein–Vergehen* by Giovanni Segantini (1858–1899), an artist renowned for his portrayal of grandiose mountain scenery. Feeling a strong affinity with Segantini's world, Webern had written into his diary the preceding autumn, following a performance of Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony by the Vienna Philharmonic under Felix Mottl:

"I long for an artist in music such as Segantini was in painting. His music would have to be a music that a man writes in solitude, away from all turmoil of the world, in

contemplation of the glaciers, of eternal ice and snow, of the somber mountain giants. It would have to be like Segantini's pictures. The onslaught of the Alpine storm, the mighty force of the mountains, the radiance of the summer sun on flower-covered meadows—all these would have to be in the music, born immediately out of the Alpine solitude. That man would then be the Beethoven of our day. An 'Eroica' would inevitably appear again, one that is younger by 100 years."

The String Quartet was written at the Preglhof, the Webern family's country estate in Carinthia. On the finished score appears the date August 25, 1905. Segantini's triptych, the composer's original inspiration, remained the formal model; there are three clearly discernible sections within the one-movement structure. To express the depth of his involvement with the work, Webern gave it the literary motto—a quotation from the German religious mystic Jacobus Boehme—which may be translated:

“The sense of triumph that prevailed within my spirit I cannot write nor tell; it can be compared with nothing but the birth of life in the midst of death—the resurrection of the dead. In this light did my mind immediately see through all things, and in all living creatures, even in weeds and grass, did recognize God, who He may be and how He may be and what His will is.”

String Quartet (1905) had its world premiere on May 26, 1962, during the First International Webern Festival in Seattle, Washington, when it was played by the University of Washington String Quartet. The first performance in Europe, by the La Salle Quartet, took place on August 3, 1965, during the Second International Webern Festival at Salzburg/Mittersill.

BACH *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit*, BWV 668 (1750)

Note courtesy of Hyperion Records Ltd, London

The text of 668, *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit* (Before your throne I now appear), has created interest in relation to the story by Bach biographer Forkel, that the prelude was 'dictated a few days before his death to [Bach's son-in-law and copyist] J.C. Altnickol.' There is a gentle meditative quality to the prelude, suggested by the rhythmic simplicity, and the time taken for each chorale phrase to unfold. The inner parts stay faithfully to the motifs of each successive phrase of the chorale, lending an integrated feel, and the final interrupted cadence—unlocking the final few bars—is touching. The effect of the movement is a meditation on all that has preceded.

Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit is the text Bach had in mind as he dictated the revisions to Altnickol, and this was copied into the end of the manuscript containing the organ works now known as the Great Eighteen chorale preludes. An earlier version wound up with *The Art of Fugue*, thus linking two formidable projects that represented the summation of Bach's musical and spiritual practice.

Folk Music from Nordic Countries

arr. Danish String Quartet

Note courtesy of the Danish String Quartet, excerpted from their disc liner notes for “Wood Works”

Folk music is the music of all the small places. It is the local music, but as such, it is also the music of everywhere and everyone. Like rivers, the melodies and dances have flowed slowly from region to region: whenever a fiddler stumbles on a melody, he would play it and make it his own before passing it on. You don't own a folk tune—you simply borrow it for a while.

We have borrowed and arranged a selection of tunes that are all very close to our hearts. We perform them as a string quartet, one of the most powerful musical vehicles we know. The string quartet is a pure construct: four simple instruments made of wood. But in all its simplicity, the string quartet is capable of expressing a myriad of colors, nuances, and emotions—just like folk music. Our idea is to marry these two simple but powerful things: the folk music and the string quartet. Normally the string quartet has been reserved for the

classical masters. Now we want to see what happens when we let the Nordic folk music flow through the wooden instruments of the string quartet. Does it work? We hope so. And remember: we simply borrowed these tunes. They have already been returned.

Ensemble Biography

DANISH STRING QUARTET

Frederik Øland, Violin

Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, Violin

Asbjørn Nørgaard, Viola

Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, Cello

Among today's many exceptional chamber music groups, the Grammy-nominated Danish String Quartet continuously asserts its preeminence. The quartet's playing reflects impeccable musicianship, sophisticated artistry, exquisite clarity of ensemble, and, above all, an expressivity inextricably bound to the music, from Haydn to Shostakovich to contemporary scores. Performances bring

a rare musical spontaneity, giving audiences the sense of hearing even treasured canon repertoire as if for the first time, and exuding a palpable joy in music-making that have made them enormously in demand on concert stages throughout the world. The recipient of many awards and prestigious appointments, including *Musical America's* 2020 Ensemble of the Year and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, the Danish String Quartet was named in 2013 as BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists and appointed to the the Bowers Program (formerly CMS Two).

In 2020–2021 the Danish String Quartet introduces *Doppelgänger*, an ambitious four-year international commissioning project. *Doppelgänger* pairs world premieres from four renowned composers—Bent Sørensen, Lotta Wennäkoski, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Thomas Adès—with four major works from the masterful chamber music repertoire of Schubert. Each season, the Danish String Quartet will perform a world premiere on a program with its doppelgänger—the Schubert quartet or quintet that inspired it—culminating in the premiere of a quintet by Adès, after the great String Quintet in C Major. The *Doppelgänger* pieces are

commissioned by the Danish String Quartet with the support of Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances, UC Santa Barbara Arts & Lectures, Vancouver Recital Society, Flagey in Brussels, and Muziekgebouw in Amsterdam. The first commission, composed by Bent Sørensen and inspired by Schubert's quartet in G Major (D.887), is scheduled to premiere in 2021.



[Caption: The Danish String Quartet perform in the Mahaney Arts Center's Robison Hall, in October 2017, as part of the Middlebury Performing Arts Series' 98th season. Photo by Aaron Kimball.]

As part of a three-year residency, the Danish String Quartet brought a series of five concerts, which mirror the programs in its ongoing recording project with ECM New Series, *Prism*, to La Jolla Music Society in November 2019. Each *Prism* program is an exploration of the symbiotic musical and contextual relationships between Bach fugues, Beethoven string quartets, and works by Shostakovich, Schnittke, Bartok, Mendelssohn, and Webern, forming an expertly curated musical evolution within each individual program and across the entire *Prism* repertory. *Prism I*, the first disc of this five-album project for the ECM label, was released in September 2018 and garnered a Grammy nomination in the category of Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance for the group's recordings of Beethoven's op. 127 in E-flat Major, Bach's Fugue in E-flat Major (arranged by Mozart), and Shostakovich's final string quartet, no. 15 in E-flat minor. *Prism II* was subsequently released in September 2019 to rave reviews including a five-star review from *BBC Music Magazine*, "Best Classical Music of 2019" from the *New York Times*, and "Classical Music You Must Hear" from Apple Music.

The Danish String Quartet returned to North America in the 2019–2020 season as one of the most prominent musical voices in the monumental celebrations of Beethoven’s 250th year. With two sweeping North American tours, the quartet engaged its expansive audience in programming centered on the towering Beethoven string quartets, as well as many important works which inspired, and were inspired by, these revered giants of the classical canon. The quartet returned to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center as the featured string quartet, performing the entire Beethoven cycle over the course of six concerts in February 2020. European engagements included dates throughout Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Brussels.

The group takes an active role in reaching new audiences through special projects. In 2007 it established the DSQ Festival, now in its 12th year, which takes place in an intimate and informal setting at Copenhagen’s Bygningsskulturens Hus. The 2019 DSQ Festival featured an array of meticulously curated programs, including such guests as pianists Vikingur Olafsson and Wu Qian, violinist Alexi Kenney, and violist Jennifer Stumm. In 2016 the quartet inaugurated

a new music festival, Series of Four, in which it both performs and invites colleagues—the Quatuor Ébène and mandolin player Chris Thile, among others—to appear at the venerable Danish Radio Concert Hall. Concerts this season include collaborations with pianist Gabriel Kahane and violinist Pekka Kuusisto.

Since its debut in 2002, the Danish String Quartet has demonstrated a special affinity for Scandinavian composers, from Carl Nielsen to Hans Abrahamsen, alongside music of Mozart and Beethoven. The quartet's musical interests also encompass Nordic folk music, the focus of *Wood Works*, an album of traditional Scandinavian folk music, released by Dacapo in 2014. As a follow-up, the Danish String Quartet released *Last Leaf* for ECM, an album of traditional Scandinavian folk music. This recording was one of the top classical albums of 2017, as chosen by NPR, Spotify and the *New York Times*, among others.

Named Artist-in-Residence in 2006 by the Danish Radio, the quartet was offered the opportunity to record the Nielsen string quartets at the Danish Radio Concert Hall. The two CDs, released in 2007 and

2008 on the Dacapo label, garnered enthusiastic praise for their first recordings—“these Danish players have excelled in performances of works by Brahms, Mozart and Bartók in recent years. But they play Nielsen’s quartets as if they owned them,” noted the *New York Times*. In 2012 the Danish String Quartet released a recording of Haydn and Brahms quartets on the German AVI-music label, for which they also received critical notice. “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,” observed the *New York Times*. Subsequently, the quartet recorded works by Brahms and Robert Fuchs with clarinetist Sebastian Manz, released by AVI-music in 2014 and in 2017, an album with music of Thomas Adès, Per Nørgård, and Abrahamsen, the quartet’s debut album on ECM.

The Danish String Quartet has received numerous citations and prizes, including First Prize in the Vagn Holmboe String Quartet Competition and the Charles Hennen International Chamber Music Competition in the Netherlands, as well as the Audience Prize at the Trondheim International String Quartet Competition in 2005. In

2009 the Danish String Quartet won First Prize in the 11th London International String Quartet Competition, now known as the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet competition, and returns to the celebrated London concert hall frequently. The quartet was awarded the 2010 NORDMETALL-Ensemble Prize at the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Festival in Germany, and in 2011 it received the Carl Nielsen Prize, the highest cultural honor in Denmark.

Violinists Frederik Øland and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen and violist Asbjørn Nørgaard met as children at a music summer camp where they played soccer and made music together. As teenagers, they began the study of classical chamber music and were mentored by Tim Frederiksen of Copenhagen's Royal Danish Academy of Music. In 2008 the three Danes were joined by Norwegian cellist Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin.

“The Danish String Quartet stand out: not because they're shinier or plusher or pushier than the rest, but because of their nimble charisma, stylish repertoire and the way their

light and grainy shading can turn on a dime.”—Kate
Molleson, *The Guardian*

“They could be grounded in their tone or mystical. They
allowed time to stand still, and they could assume the
pose of excitingly aggressive rockers. They did it all.”—
Mark Swed, *Los Angeles Times*

“The Danish are remarkable, as ever—capable of intense
blend, extreme dynamic variation (in which they seem
glued together), perfect intonation even on harmonics,
and constant vitality and flow.”—Andrew Mellor,
Gramophone

“This is one of the best quartets before the public
today.”—Robert Battey, *Washington Post*

For more information, please visit danishquartet.com

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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 <p>March 12 Sullivan Fortner Jazz Piano</p>	 <p>March 26 CMS: Vivaldi Explosion</p>	 <p>April 2 <i>Same But Different</i> Brown and Winfield</p>	 <p>April 23 CMS: Bach Brandenburg Concertos</p>
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Register for free at <http://go.middlebury.edu/pasregistration/>

Land Acknowledgement

Middlebury College sits on land which has served as a site of meeting and exchange among indigenous peoples since time immemorial. The Western Abenaki are the traditional caretakers of these Vermont lands and waters, which they call *Ndakinna*, or “homeland.” We remember their connection to this region and the hardships they continue to endure. We give thanks the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it.