



MIDDLEBURY  
PERFORMING ARTS SERIES

P R E S E N T S

# Emerson String Quartet

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2023

7:30 PM ET

MIDDLEBURY CHAPEL





# Emerson String Quartet

Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, Violins

Lawrence Dutton, Viola

Paul Watkins, Cello

## The Farewell Tour

*Program*

*Lyric for Strings*

**George Walker**

(1922–2018)

*Philip Setzer, first violin*

*Drink the Wild Ayre*

**Sarah Kirkland Snyder**

(b. 1973)

*Eugene Drucker, first violin*

**String Quartet No. 12 in D-flat Major, Op. 133**

**Dmitri Shostakovich**

Moderato – Allegretto – Moderato – Allegretto – Moderato

(1906–1975)

Allegretto – Adagio – Moderato – Adagio – Moderato – Allegretto

*Eugene Drucker, first violin*

**String Quartet in F Major**

**Maurice Ravel**

Allegro moderato (F major)

(1875–1937)

Assez vif, très rythmé (A minor)

Très lent (B $\flat$  major)

Vif et agité (F major)

*Philip Setzer, first violin*

*The program will be performed without intermission.*

*Tonight's performance is made possible thanks to support from the Paul Nelson Performance Endowment, the Rothrock Family Residency Fund, and the Music Accord commissioning consortium.*

## *Program Notes*

### **George Walker** *Lyric for Strings*

*Program note courtesy of the L.A. Philharmonic*

Pianist and composer George Walker (1922–2018) knew his grandmother – his mother’s mother – very well. She had experienced much during her long life, including losing her first husband when he was sold; she herself managed to escape slavery. About a year after she died, the 24-year-old Walker composed his first string quartet. When he was given the chance to hear its poetic slow movement performed by a string orchestra, he added the title *Lament* and dedicated it as an elegy “To my grandmother.” Later titled *Lyric for Strings*, the six-minute work – he continued to call it “my grandmother’s piece” – became his best-known and most-performed work in a long and remarkable career. In 1996, he became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for *Music for Lilacs*, which Walker wrote for soprano and orchestra.

### **Sarah Kirkland Snyder** *Drink the Wild Ayre*

*Program note by the composer, Sarah Kirkland Snyder*

*Drink the Wild Ayre* is my second string quartet. I wrote my first over 20 years ago, while poring over recordings by the Emerson String Quartet. At that time, I was new to composition and bought every CD of theirs I could find, obsessively studying counterpoint and voice-leading via their recordings. Their performances became my benchmark for the masterpieces they recorded; their sounds became synonymous, in my mind, with the composer’s intent. For me, theirs was the definitive interpretation of all the great string quartets in history.

So, when the invitation to write this piece came in – the Emerson’s final commission, to be performed during this, their final season – I nearly fell off my chair. I am still awestruck and humbled to have written this piece for some of my earliest heroes.

The title is a playful nod to one of the most famous quotes by their transcendentalist namesake essayist/philosopher/poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, Drink the wild air’s salubrity.” An ayre is a song-like, lyrical piece. The title seemed an apt reference not only to the lilting, asymmetrical rhythms of the music’s melodic narrative, but also to the questing spirit, sense of adventure, and full-hearted passion with which the Emerson has thrown itself into everything it has done for the past 47 years. Here’s to the singular magic of these artistic giants, and the new adventures that await them.

*This work was co-commissioned by the Emerson String Quartet and the Music Accord commissioning consortium, of which the Middlebury Performing Arts Series is a member.*

## **String Quartet No. 12 in D-flat Major, Op. 133**

**Dmitri Shostakovich**

*Program note by Susan Key, courtesy of the L.A. Philharmonic*

Shostakovich dedicated each of his late quartets to an individual member of the acclaimed Beethoven Quartet; thus, each has a personal quality that not only reflects its creator's state of mind but also the idiosyncrasies of its dedicatee: in this case, the ensemble's leader, violinist Dmitri Tsyganov. Like many of Shostakovich's late quartets, this 1968 work eschews the conventional four-movement structure in favor of a short first movement and a long second. What looks unbalanced on paper, however, has an underlying aesthetic coherence that is gradually revealed to the ear.

The quartet opens with a 12-tone row played once by the cello before immediately yielding to a tonal theme. It is tempting to hear this opening in psychological terms (an artistic identity refusing to be confined to any ideology or system). But it also serves as a reminder that the controversy surrounding Schoenberg's dodecaphonic system has often obscured the liberating effect it has had on composers of all persuasions, especially in their understanding of music's vertical (harmonic) and horizontal (melodic) relationships. As Shostakovich, who used the technique sporadically in his late works, explained: "Everything is good in moderation... the use of elements from these complex systems is entirely justified if it is dictated by the idea of the composition." If we cannot say for certain what the idea was in this case, we can certainly describe its musical effect: opening an infinite yet undefinable tonal space, after which the clear tonality of the melody seems found rather than constructed and the rest of the movement never loses the feeling of a search for closure. Shostakovich exploits this feeling, as the legato melody becomes more fragmented and asymmetrical, and the row intrudes at significant moments. The melody extends the search into the high register before fading out, still unsettled.

The second movement opens in stark contrast, as a trill gives way to an insistent melodic idea that begins with repeated notes and is molded into a variety of melodic ideas whose odd shapes and abruptly shifting textures lend a grotesque quality (and echo Tsyganov's legendarily vigorous style of playing). Then a long passage for solo cello leads into a dark introspective section. Because of the way Shostakovich sustains the tension through numerous fragmentary bits, the movement has a kind of epic quality. Later in the movement, we hear material from the opening subtly re-inserted, thus re-balancing the architecture of the work even while reinforcing its epic nature. The ending achieves ultimate balance by contrast, with a surprising—and in this context breathtaking—major chord that we suddenly understand to be the closure we have been expecting since the opening 12-tone row.

## **String Quartet in F Major**

**Maurice Ravel**

*Program note courtesy of the L.A. Philharmonic*

In 1903, the 28-year-old Ravel was completing his studies at the Paris Conservatory. By this time, he had been studying there for half of his life and had entered the much-desired Grand Prix de Rome competition several times, though never receiving higher than second place. This first and only string quartet again failed to win him the prestigious award. However, the Quartet in F major is an early demonstration of Ravel's brilliant juxtaposition of formality and sensuality, and his incredible use of tone color. At times it sounds like a much fuller string section than four instruments.

It is a common occurrence for artists to thrive within some sort of limitation or structure. So it was with Ravel, whose music blossomed under restraint. Though Ravel may have been the consummate perfectionist composer, he seems to have felt a certain freedom to be bold and spontaneous in writing the String Quartet. The String Quartet is often considered Ravel's first masterpiece and continues to be one of the most widely performed chamber music works in the classical repertoire, representing Ravel's early achievements and rise from obscurity.

The Quartet does follow the traditional four-movement classical structure. Like Debussy's String Quartet of a decade earlier, Ravel's Quartet also uses themes cyclically throughout the work. Ravel dedicated the piece to his teacher, Gabriel Fauré. The first movement – marked *Allegro moderato* – *Très doux* (very sweet) – is full of lyrical and soaring lines on the violin. The second movement, the shortest of the Quartet, is marked *Assez vif* (rather lively). The music shifts back and forth between *pizzicato* and more lyrical sections, all highlighting the triple meter with different rhythmic combinations reminiscent of Iberian folk music. The slower, more lyrical middle section of the movement sounds at times almost timeworn – primeval or exotic – with the first violin playing creaky, rising lines while the other strings pluck out eerie accompaniment. Low, *pizzicato* runs leap back into the first section material, and barge ahead to a stomping conclusion.

The nocturne-like third movement, *Très lent* (very slow), recycles melodic material from the first movement, moving between tension and relaxation throughout, with effective use of tremolo in the supporting lines. At several moments, the first violin soars high, full of romantic bittersweetness, then subsides, as stranger and more suspenseful themes take over. Although the music is slow and contemplative, there is a sense of inevitable movement forward, as if we are strapped into a roller coaster car moving slowly on the track. Finally, it comes to rest high and soft, giving some peace after a great deal of disquiet.

The finale, *Vif et agité* (lively and agitated), starts and ends stormily, with moments of respite. Vigorous eighth notes open and are answered by recollections of the first movement. There is great unity in the String Quartet, with cyclical themes throughout.

### *Ensemble Biography*

#### **Emerson String Quartet**

Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer, Violins

Lawrence Dutton, Viola

Paul Watkins, Cello

“The Emerson performances represented an extraordinary fusion of experience and authority with audacity and freshness.”

— *The Boston Globe*

“... with musicians like this there must be some hope for humanity.”

— *The Times (London)*



The Emerson String Quartet will have its final season of concerts in 2022–23, disbanding after more than four decades as one of the world’s premier chamber music ensembles. The Quartet has made more than 30 acclaimed recordings, and has been honored with nine GRAMMYs® (including two for Best Classical Album), three Gramophone Awards, the Avery Fisher Prize, and Musical America’s “Ensemble of the Year” award. As part of their larger mission to keep the string quartet form alive and relevant, they have commissioned and premiered works from some of today’s most esteemed composers, and have partnered in performance with leading soloists such as Renée Fleming, Barbara Hannigan, Evgeny Kissin, Emanuel Ax, Mstislav Rostropovich, and Yefim Bronfman, James Galway, Edgar Meyer, Menahem Pressler, Leon Fleisher, André Previn, and Isaac Stern, to name a few.

In its final season, the Quartet will give farewell performances across North America and Europe, including San Francisco's Herbst Theater, Chicago's Orchestra Hall, Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music, Vienna's Musikverein, Prague's Rudolfinum, London's Southbank Centre for the completion of its acclaimed cycle of Shostakovich quartets, and more, before coming home to New York City for its final series there with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, in a trio of programs entitled *Emerson Dimensions* where the Quartet will perform some of its most storied repertoire. They will give several performances of André Previn's *Penelope* with Renée Fleming and Uma Thurman, including at the Los Angeles Opera, and they will appear at Carnegie Hall with Evgeny Kissin to perform the Dvořák Quintet as part of a benefit concert for the Andrei Sakharov Foundation. The final performance as the Emerson String Quartet will take place in October 2023 in New York City, and will be filmed for a planned documentary by filmmaker Tristan Cook.

The Quartet's extensive discography includes the complete string quartets of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bartók, Webern, and Shostakovich, as well as multi-CD sets of the major works of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Dvořák. In its final season, the Quartet will record Schoenberg's Second Quartet with Barbara Hannigan for release in 2023, with the sessions video documented by Mathieu Amalric for a short film. Deutsche Grammophon will also reissue its box set of the Emerson Complete Recordings on the label, with two new additions. In October 2020, the group released a recording of Schumann's three string quartets for the Pentatone label. In the preceding year, the Quartet joined forces with GRAMMY®-winning pianist Evgeny Kissin to release a collaborative album for Deutsche Grammophon, recorded live at a sold-out Carnegie Hall concert in 2018.

Formed in 1976 and based in New York City, the Emerson String Quartet was one of the first quartets whose violinists alternate in the first violin position. The Quartet, which takes its name from the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, balances busy performing careers with a commitment to teaching, and serves as Quartet-in-Residence at Stony Brook University. In 2013, cellist Paul Watkins – a distinguished soloist, award-winning conductor, and devoted chamber musician – joined the original members of the Quartet to form today's group.

In the spring of 2016, the State University of New York awarded full-time Stony Brook faculty members Philip Setzer and Lawrence Dutton the status of Distinguished Professor, and conferred the title of Honorary Distinguished Professor on part-time faculty members Eugene Drucker and Paul Watkins. The Quartet's members also hold honorary doctorates from Middlebury College, the College of Wooster, Bard College, and the University of Hartford. In January of 2015, the Quartet received the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award, Chamber Music America's highest honor, in recognition of its significant and lasting contribution to the chamber music field.



*The Emerson String Quartet enthusiastically endorses Thomastik strings,  
and appears by arrangement with IMG Artists,  
and records exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon.*

*emersonquartet.com*

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*Professor of Music Emeritus Emory Fanning, the Emerson String Quartet,  
and guest lecturer H.C. Robbins Landon on the steps of the Middlebury Chapel in 1982.*

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*We remember their connection to this region and the hardships they continue to endure.*

*We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it.*